

# Introduction to the Book of Numbers

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## Introductory Materials

This introduction has barely been started. This will become a part of the introduction to Numbers, which introduction is far from being complete.

**Preface:** Although so much material refers back to the Exodus generation, there are actually two generations that Moses led. One of those generations flunks out, and the other one does not. The book of Numbers is all about these two generations and why one failed and the other succeeded.

On the one hand, the book of Leviticus covered perhaps a month of Israel in the desert, the book of Numbers spans nearly 39 years in the desert-wilderness. This is a pretty long time, but only a few incidents and things are recorded. It is not as if one chapter is devoted to one year.

The book of Numbers is one of the buried treasures of the Bible. There are certainly a few chapters which seem to be records, primarily (like the two chapters where the tribes are numbered). However, there is a lot of interesting narrative here. Once you complete the study of this book, you will never again wonder how it took Moses 40 years to travel from Egypt to Sinai to Canaan.

**Moses Lost in the Desert** (Meme); from [Facebook](#); accessed March 30, 2025.

**Introduction:** Moses was never lost in the Sinai desert. He did not keep making wrong turns causing the people of Israel to remain in the desert until he figured it out.

First of all, Moses had been trained to become a Pharaoh of Egypt. He grew up in the palace and he was educated in the palace. He knew geography. He knew the geography of Egypt and he had an extensive knowledge of the countries and their geography all around. He knew where the mountains, the desert-wilderness, the rivers and bodies of water all around Egypt were.

When Moses had to escape Egypt, he did not just run, run, run anywhere. There were places where he could go and be safe from Egypt's influence. He knew where these places were and he knew how to get to them. He eventually ended up in Midian, where he was never found for the next forty years. God knew where he was; no one in Egypt had any idea where he was.

When God led Israel out of Egypt, God knew even better than Moses where everything was. So when God led Israel, God knew exactly where everything was and he preserved Israel in that desert-wilderness (the Sinai desert then was nothing like the Sinai desert today).

Israel did not enter into the land because of Israel's negative volition, not because they were lost. This is clearly taught in the book of Numbers. Israel came right up to the border of Canaan and could have crossed over that border and taken the land, but they did not. They chose not to go into Canaan to take it.

Because Israel chose not to take Canaan, God brought them back deeper into the Sinai desert, and he let one generation of warriors rise up while the ones not willing to take the land died out naturally (or died out according to the sin unto death).

Too often, we think of those Israelites who exited Egypt as being the Exodus generation. However, there were actually two generations. There was Gen X and the generation of promise. Those who left Egypt were Gen X. This is the generation of Israelites of whom God said, "I hated that generation!" These were the Israelites who were aged 20 and up at the time of exiting Egypt. These were the Israelites who were nothing but trouble to God, despite all that God did for them.



Those who were under age 20 or who were born to the Israelites over the next forty years make up the generation of promise. They would succeed where their parents failed. They will go into the land of promise, walking over the corpses of their dead parents left behind in the desert-wilderness east of Egypt and south of Canaan.

Their exact route is given in the narrative portions of Exodus and Numbers, and is summed up in Numbers 33. We can come pretty close to determined almost every step taken by the people of Israel, although there are a few disagreements along the way.

Generally speaking, the Israelites exited Egypt, heading south toward the Red Sea. At some point, they crossed over the Sea of Reeds, heading east. They arrive at the Sinai mountains where they received the Law of God. That was year one. Then they went north with a slight westerly bearing, so that they came up to desert-wilderness region below what would become southern Israel (specifically, Judah). It was at this point that Gen X hesitated and would not go to war against the Canaanites as instructed by God.

Therefore, Israel retreated back into the land of desert-wilderness and remained there for the next 38½ years. Gen X began to die off. Some of them died off naturally; and some of them died off according to the principle of the sin unto death.

After about forty years, Gen X was dead, and the next generation rose up to replace them. This next generation I have dubbed the *generation of promise*. God led this new generation up north, but this time, coming up on the east side of the Dead Sea. It would be from this direction that they would begin to conquer the land of promise as guided by God (which takes us to the book of Joshua).

## **Author/Time of Writing**

There is nothing in the writing or recording of the Book of Numbers which would suggest anything other than Moses as the author (although he may have dictated the book to Joshua). In most cases, the recording was probably done reasonably close to the time period during which the narrative takes place.

There are those who make all sorts of claims for authorship other than Moses. Much of the blame/credit for this goes to the originators of the JEPD theory. The JEPD theory teaches that someone (not Moses) recorded much of the five books of Moses (Moses did not write Genesis) used the word *Jehovah* more often than he used the word *Elohim*. He is an unnamed person known as the Jehovist and he wrote hundreds of years after these events took place. There is another person, called the Elohist, who, surprisingly enough, used the word *Elohim* more often than he used the word *Jehovah*. Most of the time, these people are said to have written this late in Hebrew history, maybe in the 8<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Someone—not sure who—knit these two accounts together. The priests, late in the game, recorded all of the priestly passages and some other guy wrote Deuteronomy. If you have never heard this theory before, you are fine. You haven't missed anything. Even though this is taught in many seminaries all over the world, it really does not solve

any real problems other than the supposed problem of Moses not having writing materials when he lived (but he did).

At some point in time—late in Hebrew history—these books were introduced as if Moses wrote them, and they has always had them, and whatever changes which they made, everyone accepted it and moved on.

There is no record of anything like this taking place. Secondly, unless you do not know a single thing about religious people, you do not introduce a whole new set of doctrines and ceremonies and say, “This is what Moses wrote and we have had these books for a long time.” If such a thing were true (and it is not), here is exactly what would have happened. Most people who have stayed with exactly what they have learned and been doing all of their lives. A smaller percentage of people, perhaps 5–10%, would have accepted these books (which did not exist before).

Secondly, the book of Exodus spends a huge amount of time talking about the Tabernacle. If this were written in 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. or later, what would the authors know nothing about? The Tabernacle! They would have never seen the Tabernacle; their parents would have never seen the Tabernacle and their grandparents would not have seen the Tabernacle. And yet, one of the most important topics of Exodus and Leviticus is the Tabernacle.

Without going into any more depth, the JEPD theory is primarily a theory which would make a person doubt the inspiration of Scripture. If Moses were not the author of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, then how could we be convinced that anything found in those books is real or true? If these books were invented by people who pretended to be Moses, is that not the very definition of a series of made-up stories?

# Numbers



## Summary Sections

Numbers (Word Cloud); from [Bible Pics](#); accessed April 2, 2025.

Sentence or Paragraph Descriptions of the Book of Numbers

<p>Arno Clement Gaebelein</p>	<p>The fourth book of the Pentateuch bears in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) the title Arithmoi, of which the Latin Numeri and our English “Numbers” are translations. It is called by this name because the people Israel are twice numbered in this book. The first time when they started on their journey, and the second time at the close of their thirty-eight years wandering (chapters 1, and 26). The Hebrews have given to this book the name Be-Midbar, which means “in the wilderness.”</p> <p>It is the wilderness book and covers the entire period of Israel’s history from the second month of the second year after the Exodus from Egypt to the tenth month of the fortieth year. However, the years of wanderings are passed over in silence, only the different camps are mentioned. Our annotations point out the significance of this.<sup>1</sup></p>
<p>Cambridge Bible</p>	<p>The Book of Numbers is the fourth of the six writings which modern students have grouped together under the name of ‘the Hexateuch’ (see Chapman, Introduction to the Hexateuch, p. 6). The Greek title ἀριθμοί, of which ‘Numbers’ is a translation, was given to the book on account of the numberings of the Israelites recorded in it. The Hebrew title is Bammidhbār (‘In the wilderness’), taken from the words bemidhbar Sinai (‘in the wilderness of Sinai’) in Numbers 1:1.<sup>2</sup></p>

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<sup>1</sup> Arno Clement Gaebelein, *The Annotated Bible*; 1919; from e-Sword, Book Comments for the Book of Numbers.

<sup>2</sup> *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*; 1882-1921; by Cambridge University Press; General Editor J. J. S. Perowne, from e-sword, Book Comments for the Book of Numbers.

Matthew Henry	<p>The titles of the five books of Moses, which we use in our Bibles, are all borrowed from the Greek translation of the Seventy, the most ancient version of the Old Testament that we know of. But the title of this book only we turn into English; in all the rest we retain the Greek word itself, for which difference I know no reason but that the Latin translators have generally done the same. Otherwise this book might as well have been called Arithmoi, the Greek title, as the first Genesis, and the second Exodus; or these might as well have been translated, and called, the first the Generation, or Original, the second the Out-let, or Escape, as this Numbers. - This book was thus entitled because of the numbers of the children of Israel, so often mentioned in this book, and so well worthy to give a title to it, because it was the remarkable accomplishment of God's promise to Abraham that his seed should be as the stars of heaven for multitude. It also relates to two numberings of them, one at mount Sinai (ch. 1), the other in the plains of Moab, thirty-nine years after (ch. 26). And not three men the same in the last account that were in the first. The book is almost equally divided between histories and laws, intermixed.<sup>3</sup></p>
Matthew Henry	<p>This book is called NUMBERS from the several numberings of the people contained in it. It extends from the giving of the law at Sinai, till their arrival in the plains of Jordan. An account is given of their murmuring and unbelief, for which they were sentenced to wander in the wilderness nearly forty years; also some laws, both, moral and ceremonial. Their trials greatly tended to distinguish the wicked and hypocrites from the faithful and true servants of God, who served him with a pure heart.<sup>4</sup></p>
E. M. Zerr	<p>The book of Numbers gets its title from the Greek word arithmoi. This is the word assigned by the LXX (The Septuagint), due to the two numberings of the people in chapter 1 and 26. Numbers is the fourth of five books commonly called the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy).<sup>5</sup></p>

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*; from e-Sword, Book Comments for the Book of Numbers.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*; from e-Sword, Book Comments for the Book of Numbers.

<sup>5</sup> E.M. Zerr, *E.M. Zerr Bible Commentary*; © 1949-56 by E.M. Zerr; Book Comments for the Book of Numbers.

<b>Brief Chapter Descriptions (Kukis)</b>	
<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Chapter Description</b>
Numbers 1	A census is taken of Israel's warriors. Levites were exempt from military service.
Numbers 2	The organization of Israel's tribes into twelve fighting forces.
Numbers 3	The sons of Aaron. The responsibilities of the Levites God accepts the Levites in place of the firstborn.
Numbers 4	The specific duties of the Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites.
Numbers 5	Unclean persons. Confession and restitution. The adultery test.
Numbers 6	The Nazirites and their vow. Aaron blesses the Israelites.
Numbers 7	Twelve day of offerings by the twelve leaders. A summary of those offerings. God speaks to Moses from above the Mercy Seat.
Numbers 8	The seven lamps (I believe that these are all on the same lampstand). Cleansing of the Levites. Term of service for the Levites.
Numbers 9	The second Passover is celebrated at Sinai. The addendum Passover service. The cloud and fire-cloud over the Tabernacle.



Numbers 10	<p>The manufacture and use of the silver trumpets.</p> <p>Israel leaves Sinai.</p> <p>Moses invites his brother-in-law to travel with Israel.</p>
Numbers 11	<p>Israel complains because they do not have any meat.</p> <p>Moses responds to their complaints.</p> <p>70 elders are selected to assist Moses.</p> <p>God and Moses discuss the people's desire for meat. God delivers quail to the people of Israel, but it comes with a plague.</p>
Numbers 12	<p>Miriam and Aaron rebel against Moses.</p>
Numbers 13	<p>Twelve spies are sent into Canaan. They return with a report.</p>
Numbers 14	<p>The people reject their situation and talk about organizing a return to Egypt. Moses intervenes for the people. God promises judgment.</p> <p>Israel makes an attempt to invade the land, but they are pushed back.</p>
Numbers 15	<p>Offerings by Israelites, offerings by resident aliens, and offerings that Israel will offer when they enter into the land.</p>
Numbers 16	<p>Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebel against Moses and Aaron. God vindicates Moses and Aaron.</p> <p>Korah's family is executed. Censers used for the altar.</p> <p>The Israelites continue to complain.</p>
Numbers 17	<p>The budding of Aaron's rod.</p>
Numbers 18	<p>Responsibilities for Priests and descendants of Levi. Levites will not be given lots of land in Canaan. They have special offerings.</p>
Numbers 19	<p>Purification ceremonies.</p>
Numbers 20	<p>Miriam dies.</p> <p>The waters of Meribah. Moses strikes the rock.</p> <p>Edom refuses to let Israel go through their land.</p> <p>Aaron dies.</p>

Numbers 21	<p>The destruction of Arad.</p> <p>The bronze serpent.</p> <p>The song of the well.</p> <p>Israel defeats the Amorites. Israel defeats the king of Bashan.</p>
Numbers 22	<p>Balak summons Balaam, asking Balaam to curse Israel. God will not allow Balaam to curse Israel.</p> <p>Balaam's donkey rebukes Balaam.</p>
Numbers 23	<p>Balaam's first sacrifice and first prophecy. Balaam's second sacrifice and second prophecy. Balaam's third sacrifice.</p>
Numbers 24	<p>Balaam third prophecy. Balaam's final prophecy.</p>
Numbers 25	<p>The Baal-Peor sex cult. Phinehas brings this cult to a sudden end by killing an Israelite man lying with a Midianite woman. God orders the destruction of the Midianites.</p>
Numbers 26	<p>A census is taken of the new generation of Israelites.</p> <p>How the land will be divided.</p> <p>Leviticus genealogies.</p>
Numbers 27	<p>Zelophehad's daughters.</p> <p>Joshua will succeed Moses.</p>
Numbers 28	<p>The daily offerings, the Sabbath offerings, the monthly offerings, the Passover and unleavened bread offerings and the offerings for the feast of weeks.</p>
Numbers 29	<p>Offerings for the Festival of Trumpets; Offerings for the Day of Atonement; Offerings for the Feast of Booths.</p>
Numbers 30	<p>Vows made by men and vows made by women</p>
Numbers 31	<p>The war against Midian.</p>
Numbers 32	<p>Reuben and Gad decide to live east of the Jordan River.</p>
Numbers 33	<p>Israel's entire journey summarized, city by city.</p>
Numbers 34	<p>The boundaries of the land of Israel. Tribal responsibilities given and tribal chiefs named.</p>
Numbers 35	<p>Levitical cities. Cities of refuge.</p>

I put this together using the ISV in E-sword, so some of the titles/descriptions may have been taken either from the ISV or from E-sword.

## Purpose of the Book of Numbers

One of the striking verses found in the both the Old and New Testaments is:

Numbers 14:33–34 *And your sons shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall bear your fornications until your carcasses are wasted in the wilderness; by the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a day for a year, a day for a year; you shall bear your iniquities forty years; you shall know My alienation from you. (ESV)*

Joshua 5:6–7a *For the sons of Israel had walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who had come out of Egypt were consumed, those who did not listen to the voice of Jehovah, to whom Jehovah had sworn to them not to show them the land which Jehovah swore to their fathers, to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey; these were consumed. And He raised their sons up in their place. (ESV)*

Psalms 95:10–11 *For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest." (ESV)*

Hebrews 3:7–11 *Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.' " (ESV, capitalized) (Psalm 95:7-11)*

At least four times in the Old and New Testaments, this incident (or series of incidents) is cited. The book of Numbers gives us a firsthand account of why God said these things. This is why God wiped out that first generation, and left their bodies dead in the desert before entering into the land. The book of Numbers explains to us how this came about.