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# BOOK OF NUMBERS

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**Approximate date:** 1440-1400 B.C.E. (Right); 1300-1200 B.C.E. (conservative-moderate); 500s B.C.E. (Left)

**Time period:** Israel in the wilderness

**Author:** Moses exclusively (Right); Moses, Joshua, and later editors (conservative-moderate); compiled traditions and mythologies (Left)

**Location of author:** wilderness journey after the Exodus (Right, conservative-moderate); Babylon and/or Land of Israel (Left)

**Target audience and their location:** people of Israel wandering in the desert (Right, conservative-moderate); Jewish exiles returning from Babylon (Left)

**People:**

Moses, Aaron, Israelites, Ithamar, Eldad, Medad, Joshua, Miriam, Caleb, Korah (son of Izhar), Dathan, Abiram (sons of Eliab), On (son of Peleth), Eleazar, king of Edom, king of Arad, Sihon (king of Amorites), Jahaz, Balak (son of Zippor), Balaam (son of Beor), Midianites, Moabite women, Baal of Peor (deity), Phinehas, Zimri (son of Salu), Cozbi, daughters of Zelophehad (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, Tirzah), tribal leaders of Israel (34:17-29)

**People mentioned:**

census members of Israel (ch. 1), census members of Levites (ch. 3), Kohathites, Gershonites, Merarites, tribal leaders of Israel presenting offerings (Nahshon, Nethanel, Eliab, Elizur, Shelumiel, Eliasaph, Elishama, Gamaliel, Abidan, Ahiezer, Pagiel, Ahira), twelve spies (Shammua, Shaphat, Caleb, Igal, Hoshea, Palti, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi, Gevel), descendants of Anak, Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Canaanites, Nephilim, Ammonites, Chemosh (god), Jacob, sons of Sheth, Amalek, Kenites, five kings of Midian (Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, Reba), Makir

**Places:**

Desert of Sinai, Tent of Meeting, Taberah, Kibroth Hattaavah, Hazeroth, Desert of Paran, Canaan, Negev, Desert of Zin, Rehob, Lebo Hamath, Hebron, Valley of Eshcol, Jordan, Horman, Kadesh, Meribah,<sup>1</sup> Edom, Mount Hor, Arad, Atharim, Red Sea, Oboth, Iye Abarim, Moab, Zered Valley, Arnon, Beer, Mattanah, Nahaliel, Bamoth, Pisgah, Heshbon, Ar, Dibon, Nophah, Medeba, Jazer, Bashan, Edrei, Jericho, Pethor, Kiriath Huzoth, Bamoth Baal, Zophim, Pisgah, Shittim, Gilead, Ataroth, Aroer, Atroth Shopan, Jogbehah, Beth Nimrah, Beth Haran, Elealeh, Kiriathaim, Kenath/Nobah, the journeys of Israel in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Exodus 17:6.

Exodus and wilderness (33:3-40), Salt Sea, Scorpion Pass, Hazar Addar, Azmon, Wadi of Egypt, Lebo Hamath, Zedad, Ziphon, Hazar Enan, Shepham, Riblah, Ain, Sea of Kinnereth, Levite towns, cities of refuge

**Places mentioned:**

Egypt, Zoan, Red Sea, Asshur, Eber

**Key Themes and Events:**

a census of Israelite men is taken / the Israelites are arranged in the camp in an orderly manner / a census of the Levites is taken / specific tasks are assigned to the Kohathites, Gershonites, Merarites / the purity of Israel is emphasized in: restitution for wrongs, a test for an unfaithful wife / the option of taking a Nazirite vow is given / the Aaronic Benediction is to be pronounced over Israel to bless them / specific offerings are given at the dedication of the Tabernacle, by specific men of each of the twelve tribes / instructions on how to specifically consecrate the Levites are given / the Israelites celebrate Passover, commemorating the second anniversary of the Exodus / special silver trumpets are to be blown by the priests of Israel / the Israelites depart from Sinai / fire from the Lord consumes some of the Israelites / the Israelites complain about eating only manna / God promises to send the Israelites vast quantities of quail / Eldad and Medad prophesy in the camp of Israel / Miriam and Aaron confront Moses because of his Cushite wife / Miriam becomes leprous / Moses sends twelve spies to survey the Land of Canaan / the spies bring back a negative report that spreads quickly through the camp of Israel / the Israelites complain about wanting to go back to Egypt / Moses and Aaron must entreat the Lord / the Lord decrees that those who tested Him in the wilderness will not see the Promised Land, except for Joshua and Caleb / Israelites try to enter in to the Promised Land and are beaten back by Amalekites and Canaanites / supplementary offerings to be given before the Lord, when entering the Promised Land, are detailed / offerings for unintentional sins are defined / a Sabbath-breaker is put to death (for having collected wood) / the Israelites are to put tassels on their garments / Korah and a group of followers challenge Moses' authority, and they are swallowed up by the ground / immediate atonement is made before too many Israelites are killed in a plague / Aaron's staff buds and produces almonds / the Levites are charged with performing proper duties before the Tabernacle / specific offerings and welfare are defined for the Levites and their families / special laws of cleansing, involving the ashes of a red heifer, are detailed / Miriam dies at Kadesh / the Israelites complain for lack of water, and Moses strikes a rock (Meribah) / the king of Edom denies the Israelites passage through his country / Aaron dies at Mount Hor / the Israelites destroy Arad / the Israelites complain for having to wander, and poisonous snakes are sent among the people, killing many / Israelites are healed by looking at a bronze snake on a pole / the Israelites journey to Moab / the Israelites defeat King Sihon (Amorites) and King Og (Bashan) in battle / Balak summons Balaam to curse Israel / Balaam's donkey speaks to him / Balaam is unable to curse Israel, and instead he issues four oracles of blessing / Israelite men are seduced by Moabite women / Phinehas kills two offenders on the spot, in front of the Tent of Meeting / a plague is stopped due to Phinehas' action / a second census of the Israelites is taken / the daughters of Zelophehad receive the right to inherit their father's property / Joshua is designated as Moses' successor / specific offerings to be presented before the Lord daily, on the Sabbath and during festival times,

are listed / instructions regarding oath taking and vows are detailed / the Lord commands Moses to wipe out the Midianites / the spoils from the battle with the Midianites are divided / the Reubenites and Gadites request an inheritance outside the Promised Land / the stages in Israel's wilderness journey are listed (33:3-40) / the borders of the Promised Land are detailed / tribal leaders are chosen for Israel / towns for the Levites and cities of refuge are to be established / Zelophehad's daughters were told to marry with their tribe (Manasseh) for property not to be transferred between tribes

**Key Scriptures:** Numbers 5:5-7; 6:22-27; 8:23-26; 9:14, 23; 10:35-36; 11:4-9, 18-20, 29-33; 12:6-8; 13:27-28, 30-33; 14:1-3, 10-19, 20-23; 16:28-35; 22:2-3, 10-12, 26-28; 23:7-12, 21-24; 24:5-9, 17-19; 25:6-8; 32:13-15; 33:51-52, 55-56; 34:13-15; 35:29-34 / **Worshipping a holy God** (1:1-17:16); **Living a holy life** (18:1-27:34)

**Theological Summary:** The Hebrew title for the fourth book of the Torah is *Bamidbar* (בְּמִדְבָּר), meaning either “in the wilderness” or “in the desert” (1:1). Another Jewish designation in antiquity derived from 1:1 was *V’yadaber* (וַיְדַבֵּר) or “and He spoke,” known to early Church figures such as Jerome and Epiphanaus.<sup>2</sup> Other titles included *omesh happikkudim* or “the ‘fifth’ of the census,” indicating that this text composed one-fifth of the Torah.<sup>3</sup> The Septuagint translation applied the Greek name *Arithmoi* (ΑΡΙΘΜΟΙ) to the text, derived from “according to the number of their names” (1:26, LXE). “This Greek name reflects an earlier Hebrew name for the book, well-attested in classical rabbinic sources, from a period when books of the Torah were named thematically rather than after one of their initial words”<sup>4</sup> (*Jewish Study Bible*), and was followed as *Numeri* in the Latin Vulgate. Many evangelical Christians have suggested that *Bamidbar* is a better title—effectively making the English title *Wilderness* or *Desert*—as it avoids the controversy of the debates surrounding Biblical numbering and instead focuses on the events that took place.<sup>5</sup>

The Book of Numbers may be easily divided into three broad sections: (1) Israel at Sinai, preparing to depart for the Promised Land (1:1-10:10); (2) Israel at Kadesh, delayed because of its rebellion (13:1-20:13); (3) Israel at the plains of Moab, anticipating conquest of the Promised Land (22:2-32:42). Numbers probably covers the broadest scope of the Torah (excluding Genesis), as it completes the 38-year journey of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness.

Important features appearing in Numbers include God delivering the instructions on how the Tabernacle was to be transported (chs. 1-10). Within this selection appears specific regulations for the Levites (chs. 3-4, 7-8), the banishment of those who are extremely impure (5:1-4), and how to deal with a defiled Nazirite (6:1-21). Further features detail the rebellion of the Israelites and their refusal to fully take the Land of Canaan (ch. 14), and the condemnation of those who would have to die in the wilderness because of their disbelief.

<sup>2</sup> R.C. Dentan, “Numbers, Book of,” in *IDB*, 3:567; cf. Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers,” in *EXP*, 2:662.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 614; B.A. Levine, “Numbers, Book of,” *IDBSup*, 631; Jacob Milgrom, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:1146.

<sup>4</sup> Nili S. Fox, “Numbers,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 281.

<sup>5</sup> J.A. Thompson, “Numbers,” in *NBCR*, 168; E.E. Carpenter, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 3:561.

Some of the most important chapters in Numbers are ch. 6, which includes the giving of the Aaronic Benediction, and ch. 9, the instructions concerning how Israel was to keep Passover.

Throughout Numbers, we see that God demonstrates a strong willingness to live with the Israelites, communicating to them through Moses (7:89). The Lord is a guide for the people (9:15-23), but Israel rebels against Him (ch. 15), and God shows a desire not to judge them all at first (16:20-22). God demonstrates a great deal of patience toward Israel, but ultimately in the defining part of the text (chs. 13-14) He must raise up a new generation of Israelites to replace the rebellious old generation.

There is a renewed interest today in both Judaism and Christianity to examine Numbers for encouraging a strong faith in God. We see the failure of Ancient Israel to obey or trust in Him, yet God is not remiss in punishing His own people, including Moses (ch. 20). God tests His people with false prophets such as Balaam (chs. 22-24), yet is able to issue a blessing through him (chs. 23-24). The Lord hates idolatry and sexual immorality (ch. 25). Many evangelical Christians are keen to admit that there has been a lack of interest among ministers to appropriate these important themes in preaching from Numbers, and desire to see this change.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, we may consider Numbers to be a prime example of God's ongoing *Heilsgeschichte* or salvation history.<sup>7</sup>

Some substantial historical issues are presented in Numbers with the census of Israel's population, particularly in 1:46: "all the numbered men were 603,550." Many conservative scholars take this number at face value, and extrapolate that there were as many as 2-3 million involved in the Exodus. Other conservatives have suggested that the Pentateuch uses terms such as "thousands" or "hundreds" more loosely than they would be used today, and offer some alternative views. They suggest that "a total population of two to three million...hardly seems appropriate" (*ISBE*).<sup>8</sup> While reducing Israel's population, a lesser view still asserts that God's promises to Abraham to multiply his seed was being fulfilled. The default position regarding Numbers 1:46 adhered to by many seems to be that 600,000 was more or less the exact population.<sup>9</sup>

Those who think that the numbering of 603,550 in Numbers 1:46 is something else will claim that the Hebrew term *elef* (אֶלֶף) or "thousand," can also mean "squad" when considering its Ugaritic and other Semitic cognates.<sup>10</sup> This could possibly mean that what is being referred to is 603 squads of 550, placing Israel's fighting force at around 331,650, although some would estimate it being a bit on the lower end at around 35,000.<sup>11</sup> If the total population of Ancient Israel were only somewhere in the 20,000-35,000 range, it could have difficulties as 22,273 firstborn males are specifically described in 3:43, although this itself could mean 22 squads/groups of 273 firstborn, actually being somewhere around 6,006. Another alternative to consider is that the term *elef* was easily confused with *alluf* (אֵלֹּף) or

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<sup>6</sup> Allen, in *EXP*, 2:660.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:657.

<sup>8</sup> Carpenter, "Numbers, Book of," *ISBE*, 3:565.

<sup>9</sup> Allen, in *EXP*, 2:686-691.

<sup>10</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 632-633; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:59-60.

<sup>11</sup> R. Laird Harris, "Numbers, Book of," in *NIDB*, 713; Allen, in *EXP*, 2:682-683.

“captain” in ancient times, so the 62,700 fighting men of Dan mentioned (1:39) could equate to being 60 captains and 2,700 men.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the debate over the actual numbers of Ancient Israel is in recognizing that the census techniques of the ancients are probably not those of today, and we have to allow for the possibility of things being a bit different.

If the census in Numbers is not as “exact” as we may want it to be, then the obvious conclusion drawn is that there may have not been “millions” of Israelites involved in the Exodus from Egypt. Many conservatives do adhere to an exact literal numbering, concluding, “if they fanned out with their flocks over a wide area, they could sustain themselves as did the large Nabatean kingdom in the same area in Roman times” (Harris, *NIDB*).<sup>13</sup> In response to this, other conservative interpreters may assert, “It is hard to imagine the difficulties attendant upon sustaining two to three million people living in the wilderness for forty years: food, sanitation, living space, morale” (*ISBE*).<sup>14</sup>

If we do see some kind of representative census in Numbers, then it would suggest that rather than there being 2-3 million Israelites involved in the Exodus, that there were likely only several hundred thousand, but no less than 100,000. Harrison makes the imperative point, “An understanding of the contemporary situation with reference to the population of Canaan is instructive in this respect, for it is evident from sources such as the Tell el-Amarna tablets, as well as from the excavation of Canaanite cities of the thirteenth century B.C., that the overall population of the Promised Land was itself well below three million people.”<sup>15</sup> Considering that the Torah indicates that the population of the Israelites was less than that of the Canaanites (Exodus 23:29; Deuteronomy 7:7, 17, 22), then we can safely assume that a different numbering system was used in Numbers than how we would conduct a census in the Twenty-First Century.<sup>16</sup>

The Book of Numbers and its various accountings divide theologians among three distinct groups: (1) those who think that the number totals cannot be trusted and are over exaggerated; (2) those who think that the numbers are not as exact as they would have to be today, and are possibly representative in some places, but are certainly not as low as one thousand representing “one”; (3) those who think that the numbers are exact, with no exception. Admittedly, many get confused and prefer to assert that we cannot know for certain how the Israelites took a tally of their population groups.<sup>17</sup>

If one falls into a conservative handling of the text, then the options that we have at our disposal are #2 and #3, as we would choose to consider the Israelites at the very least to number in the several hundred thousand. But ultimately, there may be no satisfactory answer to these questions with the current extant data we have on the Ancient Near East. It should not cause us to think that a miniscule amount of people were involved in the Exodus. These views do, however, challenge many Messianics who have been taught that there are only

<sup>12</sup> J.A. Thompson, “Numbers,” in *NBCR*, 169.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, “Numbers, Book of,” in *NIDB*, 714; cf. Allen, *EXP*, 2:680-681.

<sup>14</sup> Carpenter, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 3:565.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 632.

<sup>16</sup> For a further review, consult the FAQ, “Exodus, numbers of.”

<sup>17</sup> Garrett, *Archaeological Study Bible*, 197.

“exact numbers” in Scripture, and things may not be as “exact” as they may want them to be considering their ancient context.

Regarding the composition of Numbers, conservatives do assert principal Mosaic authorship, based on statements that indicate Moses’ writing activity (33:1-2), also based on the strong assumption of the literary unity of the Torah.<sup>18</sup> In this, we see that there are varied commandments given to Moses and Aaron (1:1; 3:44; 6:1; 8:1, et. al.). “According to the book the original impetus for the recording of much of the material was from Moses. It indicates numerous times that Moses received instructions from God” (*ISBE*).<sup>19</sup> However, we should not conclude exclusive Mosaic authorship of Numbers. While Moses recorded the names of the various places Israel journeyed (33:2), Numbers is likely some combination of Mosaic and scribal writing.<sup>20</sup>

There are some signs of redaction in Numbers and additions by Israel’s historians. Conservatives will often assert that Numbers “is essentially Mosaic but includes source material and glosses” (Dillard and Longman).<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most significant example of a post-Mosaic addition to the Torah appears in 12:3: “Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.” Conservatives have always pointed out that if Moses were indeed the most humble human being who ever lived—he could have never written this about himself! Harrison summarizes,

“In light of what is known about processes of scribal revision in Egypt and certain other areas of the ancient Near East, there appears to be no difficulty whatever in assuming that the reference in Numbers 12:3 concerning the modesty of Moses constitutes an addition by a later hand, quite possibly either that of Joshua or Samuel.”<sup>22</sup>

Another redaction may include the mention of the “Book of the Wars of the LORD” (21:14), “a genuine Pentateuchal source” (Harrison),<sup>23</sup> or a later source that a scribe added information from. Even though all conservatives strongly assert principal Mosaic involvement in the composition of Numbers, other textual additions would have included the census lists,<sup>24</sup> or possibly other slight additions during the time of the Israelite monarchy or via the authorization of Ezra the Priest after the Babylonian exile.<sup>25</sup> The general dating of Numbers would be tied to one’s timing of the Exodus, which for conservatives would fall between the Fifteenth or Thirteenth Centuries B.C.E. (see **Exodus** entry for a summary of the dating issues). Admittedly, thinking that anybody but Moses was involved in the composition of Numbers is difficult for many Messianics to acknowledge, even though it seems quite certain.

Affirming the antiquity of the Book of Numbers, conservative scholars such as Harrison and Kitchen point out that the arrangement of the Israelites around the Tabernacle in Numbers 2:2 conforms to the strategic layout of the Egyptian army during the reign of

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<sup>18</sup> Carpenter, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 3:562; Allen, *EXP*, 2:663-668.

<sup>19</sup> Carpenter, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 3:562.

<sup>20</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 617.

<sup>21</sup> Dillard and Longman, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 616.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 618-619.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, in *NBCR*, 168; Carpenter, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 3:562.

Ramses II.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, if Moses had been a member of the Egyptian royal house, and as Stephen attests, “a man of power in words and deeds” (Acts 7:22), he could have learned Egyptian military strategy and incorporated it in his leading Israel. Furthermore, we see that the use of silver trumpets (10:1-2) was common in Egyptian ceremonies of the Thirteenth Century.<sup>27</sup>

In stark contrast to conservative theologians who affirm prime Mosaic involvement in the composition of Numbers, liberal theologians would argue for the final form of the text existing only after the Jewish exile to Babylon in 587 B.C.E., and possibly even that it foreshadows the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel in 539 B.C.E. Liberals commonly argue that the story depicted in Numbers would have strong significance for the exiles returning from Babylon, but strongly doubt its historicity. *IDB* indicates, “It is the large amount of purely statistical material incorporated in Numbers which makes much of it seem tedious to the modern reader...Some of it seems purely idealistic and unhistorical.”<sup>28</sup> Liberals will frequently claim that the events in Numbers seem too strange to have actually occurred, such as Balaam’s donkey talking (ch. 22), and instead frequently suggest that all that is necessary is some kind of literary explanation for the journeys of Israel. Any kind of unity in Numbers is regarded as being entirely “artificial” (*IDB*).<sup>29</sup>

In the liberal scheme of Numbers’ composition, the bulk of the material is attributed to the P source or so-called Priestly writer, with incorporated additions by J and E,<sup>30</sup> and likely also D<sup>31</sup> (see **Genesis** entry for a summarization of the JEDP documentary hypothesis). While conservatives frequently respond to liberal critiques with literary explanations of Numbers’ supposed discrepancies, liberals are right to point out that there are source materials present in the text. The Book of Numbers cannot be read with any naiveté,<sup>32</sup> and even a conservative reading requires a fair bit of critical examination. Even though we might disagree with liberal presuppositions surrounding Numbers, liberals will validly point out that its “OT story is intended to be read as history and not as myth. The ancient Hebrew mind was not mythopoeic” (*IDB*),<sup>33</sup> affirming some kind of theological integrity for the book.

From a textual point of view, the Hebrew Masoretic Text of Numbers is fairly secure, with few disputations or major variances from the Samaritan Pentateuch or Greek Septuagint. This does not mean that the SP and LXX do not reflect some interpretations of commandments, but these are relatively minor. The text of Numbers has not been preserved as well as Leviticus,<sup>34</sup> likely because of the large accountings of people. But if there are any major differences in the accountings of people, they are ancient problems that go back too far

<sup>26</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 622-623.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 623.

<sup>28</sup> Dentan, “Numbers, Book of,” in *IDB*, 3:570.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:568.

<sup>30</sup> Dentan, “Numbers, Book of,” in *IDB*, 3:568; Thompson, in *NBCR*, pp 168-169; Levine, “Numbers, Book of,” in *IDBSup*, 631-632; Carpenter, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 3:562-563; Milgrom, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ABD*; 4:1148-1150; Fox, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 281.

<sup>31</sup> Dentan, “Numbers, Book of,” in *IDB*, 3:567.

<sup>32</sup> Allen, in *EXP*, 2:663.

<sup>33</sup> Dentan, in *IDB*, 3:571.

<sup>34</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 634.

in history to fix, and answers to these problems must be reconciled historically. “The very large numbers in the two census lists (Num 1-4; 26) do not betray corruption of numbers. Thus those who resort to the solution of the problem of the large numbers by suggesting textual corruption have to assume that such problems are very ancient” (Allen, *EXP*).<sup>35</sup>

The message that Numbers communicates to us today is primarily that God is merciful, yet He is also just. “Of all of God’s attributes, it is on his *hesed* [חֶסֶד] that Moses bases his plea that God not destroy Israel (14:18-20). The word *hesed* stands for God’s constancy, his fidelity to his covenant with Israel” (Milgrom, *ABD*).<sup>36</sup> The Lord does not leave Israel in the wilderness, but does wait for a proper generation to be raised up which can accomplish His tasks. He provides food for His people with the manna (ch. 11), but also strikes Miriam, Moses’ sister, with leprosy (ch. 12), and punishes Moses for striking the rock (ch. 20).

Throughout Numbers, we see God demonstrating His presence, discipline, and holiness.<sup>37</sup> The Book of Numbers “forms an essential link in that forward-directedness from Adam to Jesus” (Allen, *EXP*).<sup>38</sup> A challenge that anyone who really wants to study Numbers often faces is that he or she must have great patience. Allen points out, “In a day marked by pop art, quick fixes, and fast foods, the Book of Numbers is particularly troublesome. It simply does not appeal to the person who is unwilling to invest time and energy in the study of Scripture” (*EXP*),<sup>39</sup> and we certainly see the lack of patience in the Israelites’ behavior in Numbers. At the end of Numbers, the people of Israel are ready and prepared to enter into the Promised Land. “It is on this note of expectant hope that the book ends. Note that the hope never turns into certainty. That is, the hope of the second generation is an untried hope. This generation too will face severe threats to its faith (see Joshua), and it remains to be seen how they will respond” (Dillard and Longman).<sup>40</sup> To an extent, every generation of Believers should place themselves into the situation of Numbers.<sup>41</sup>

The current Messianic handling of Numbers is not that dissimilar from its handling of Leviticus. Like Leviticus, many of the commandments in Numbers cannot be presently observed without a working Tabernacle or Temple. But whereas Leviticus comprises mostly a code of conduct, Numbers does ask us some serious questions about the relationship of God toward His people. When we see Moses strike the rock against God’s explicit command, there are consequences that he must face (20:11-12). A few Messianics, who may have made Moses into some kind of demagogue, are confronted with the reality that he was human and that he did sin.

Perhaps more significant for the emerging Messianic movement is the fact that the Book of Numbers challenges us to become a self-critical movement that is not afraid to admit some of its problems. Certainly if we cannot identify with some of the grumbling attitudes of the Ancient Israelites, then are we to admit that we are instead “perfect”? Surely not.

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<sup>35</sup> Allen, in *EXP*, 2:661.

<sup>36</sup> Milgrom, “Numbers, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:1151.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, in *NBCR*, 170.

<sup>38</sup> Allen, in *EXP*, 2:657.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:658.

<sup>40</sup> Dillard and Longman, 89.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

Furthermore, when we consider the numerical accounts in the text, we need to be willing to admit that there are things in the Torah that are not as “black and white” as we may want them to be, such as knowing how many people were exactly involved in the Exodus. We have to remember that there was probably a different numbering system in place in 1400-1200 B.C.E. that is largely foreign to our Twenty-First Century computer mindset.

With these things said, there is a large need for today’s Messianic community to engage more with conservative-critical scholarship of Numbers that considers the historical framework of the Ancient Near East. Unfortunately, as with too much of the Tanach, sectors of the Messianic movement often give credence to ultra Orthodox and Chassidic Jewish views of Numbers, at the expense of its legitimate historicity. With the message of Numbers in view, will it take a long time for a generation of Messianic Believers to be raised up to be used effectively for the Lord? We may not know. But it does teach us that we are to endure through whatever trials may take place. As it concerns our studies of Numbers, it should include how we react properly to criticisms of the text, and whether or not we can involve ourselves with the larger theological conversations going on.

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON NUMBERS:

- 1. Do you think the title of “Numbers” accurately captures the theme of the book? Why or why not?**
- 2. What do you believe is the significance of the census of Israel? Summarize the debate concerning the large numbers.**
- 3. What was the result of the negative report brought back from the spies who surveyed Canaan?**

**4. What do you believe is the significance of Korah's rebellion? Summarize.**

**5. What is the symbolism of the bronze snake being lifted up to heal the people (Numbers 21:8-9; cf. John 3:14-15)?**

**6. Which of Balaam's oracles pronounced upon Israel do you consider to be the most important?**

**7. How did Balak ultimately get the Israelites to be cursed?**

**8. What important lessons might today's Messianic community learn by listening to the message of Numbers?**

## REFLECTION ON NUMBERS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Numbers:*