

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS

by

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Note: Author's introduction in *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Numbers: Designed as a General Help to Biblical Reading and Instruction* (New York, Ivison & Phinney, 1858). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

1. Title, Author, Scope, &c.

The title by which this book is designated by the Jews is וַיְדַבֵּר *va yedabbēr*, and *he spake*, from the first word of the original, or בְּמִדְבָּר *bemidbar*, in the wilderness, the fifth word of the verse; the last, probably, from the fact that the contents of the book relate in great measure to the history of the sojourning of the Israelites in the wilderness. The Septuagint terms is ΑΡΙΘΜΟΙ, *Arithmoi*, of which the Latin NUMERI, and the English NUMBERS are a translation. The fact is somewhat peculiar, as every one of the other books of Moses is designated by the Greek title in Anglicised form, viz., *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy*. The present book might as well have been called *Arithmoi* were it not that the Latin rendering *Numeri (Numbers)* for some reason had an early preference given it over the Greek; and for this reason it has maintained its ground.

The book originally received its denomination mainly from its account of the *numbering, mustering, or marshalling* of the people on two different occasions--the first in the commencement of the history, the other towards the close. Besides which we meet with various *lists or enumerations* of persons and places that may have entered into the account with those who first adopted the title. We have endeavored, however, in our Notes to show, from the genuine import of the terms employed, that the precise idea conveyed is not so truly that of *numbering* as of *ordering, arranging, marshalling, or, otherwise, mustering*. As some important results flow from the establishment of this construction, we commend our remarks on this head to particular attention.

The authorship of the book is, like that of some of the preceding, determined by the general current of evidence which assigns the writing of the entire Pentateuch to Moses. It is clearly recognized in the subsequent books as pertaining to that body of documents technically termed "The Law." As for instance we find in Josh. 4:12 the following distinct allusion to the arrangement made with the two tribes and a half to settle on the west side of Jordan after first crossing over with their brethren: "And the children of Reuben, and the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh,¹ passed over armed before the children of Israel, *as Moses spake unto them.*" Compare 2

¹ **Special Note:** "Half the tribe of Manasseh" is the wording in the King James Version, but it is a poor way to put it. Jacob had twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. However, instead of counting Joseph as a tribe, his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, replaced him in the list of tribes and were each called "half tribes"--each, in a sense, being half of Joseph. This way the number of tribes would still be twelve. Therefore, modern translations of Josh. 4:12 have "half tribe of Manasseh." But this now makes thirteen names to put in a list. However, since the tribe of Levi did not receive any land, there are twelve names that inherit, ten "whole" tribes and two "half" tribes. (KM)

Chron. 29:11; 31:3; Ezek. 20:13; Matt. 12:5.

The time embraced in the book extends from the early part of the second year after the exodus to the beginning of the eleventh month of the fortieth year after that event. It therefore comprehends a period of thirty-eight years and nine or ten months. Most of the transactions, however, recorded in the book seem to have taken place near the beginning and the end of this period. The date of the events mentioned about the middle of the book cannot now be ascertained. Up to ch. 10:11 we find the people remaining at Sinai, and it is then stated that on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year they were directed to remove and advance towards the Promised Land. They proceed as far as Kadesh on its borders where we find them in ch. 13:46, and where, on account of gross rebellion, the nation was condemned to wander in the desert for forty years till the then existing generation should have died away (ch. 14). From this time onward to ch. 20 it is next to impossible to fix with accuracy the order and date of the various transactions, laws, etc. recorded; but at that time we find the Israelites again at Kadesh taking measures to enter Canaan. The book closes with the people resting on the borders of the Promised Land on the east of the Jordan.

As to the time of its being written, the evidence adduced in the Introduction to the "Notes on Leviticus," §1, relative to the date of the composition of that book, leads obviously to the conclusion that while the former was written during the encampment at Mount Sinai, the latter, or the present book, was written at the station on the plains of Moab. The authority for this statement is found in Num. 36:13: "These are the commandments and the judgments which the LORD commanded by the hand of Moses unto the children of Israel in the plains of Moab by Jordan near Jericho." We can glean nothing more definite than this relative to the date of the writing.

2. *General Contents*

The history presents us with an account of the census-taking of the tribes, the consecration of the Tabernacle, and the offering of the princes at its dedication. It describes the journeys and encampments of Israel under the miraculous guidance of the cloudy pillar, the punishment at Taberah, and the signal vengeance with which, on several occasions, the Most High visited the distrustful murmurs of the people and that rebellious spirit which so often broke out in sedition against his appointed ministers. The promptitude and severity with which these rebellious outbreaks were rebuked are relieved by the signal mercy and forbearance of Heaven in listening to the prayers of Moses in behalf of the offending people.

The narrative is interspersed with various incidents collateral to the main thread of the history which are full of interest and instruction. Conspicuous among these is the account of the rebellion of Korah and his company, the visitation of the fiery flying serpents, the story of Balaam and his constrained predictions, and the miraculous budding of Aaron's rod. Henry remarks in his usual pithy way, that "an abstract of much of this book we have in a few words, Ps. 95:10, 'Forty years long was I grieved with this generation,' and application of it to ourselves, Heb. 4:1, 'Let us fear lest we seem to come short.'" It is worthy also of reflection that while the annals of many distinguished and powerful nations who were cotemporaries of the Israelites at this period are all utterly lost, here we have preserved to us the records of a handful of people that dwelt in tents and wandered strangely in a wilderness, but who were thus favored because they were the children of the covenant and the germ of the Church for countless generations.

3. Synoptical View

Part I - *Preparation for Departure from Sinai*

1. Numbering or mustering the people at large (ch. 1)
2. Order of the tribes in their encampment (ch. 2)
3. The appointment and ministrations of the Levites (chs. 3,4)
4. Various laws respecting the unclean, the woman suspected, and the Nazarite (chs. 5,6)
5. The offerings of the princes and the consecration of the Levites (chs. 7,8)
6. Regulations respecting the celebration of the Passover, the signals and order of marching, and the calling of assemblies (chs. 9,10)

Part II - *The Departure from Sinai and the Journeying to the Land of Moab, with the Murmurings on the Way*

1. Murmurings from the wearisomeness of the way and disgust with the manna (ch. 11)
2. Sedition of Aaron and Miriam (ch. 12)
3. Spies sent to explore the land (ch. 13)
4. The people murmur at their report and are punished (ch. 14)
5. Various ceremonial laws (ch. 15)
6. Rebellion and punishment of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (ch. 16)
7. Blossoming of Aaron's rod (ch. 17)
8. The duties and the support of the Priests and Levites (ch. 18)
9. Law respecting the water of separation and the sacrifice of the red heifer (ch. 19)
10. Murmuring for want of water, unbelief of Moses, perfidy of Edom, and death of Aaron (ch. 20)
11. Renewed murmurings of the people and their punishment by fiery flying serpents (ch. 21)

Part III - *Preparation for occupying the Promised Land, and Directions respecting the Occupancy*

1. The summoning of Balaam by Balak and his compliance (ch. 22)
2. Balaam's sacrifice and his prophetic benedictions (chs. 23,24)
3. The sin of the people with the Midianitish women and their punishment (ch. 25)
4. A new census taken of the people (ch. 26)
5. Law concerning inheritance, and the inauguration of Joshua (ch. 27)
6. Various laws respecting offerings (chs. 28,29)
7. Law respecting vows (ch. 30)
8. Occupation of part of the promised inheritance by reason of the slaughter of the Midianites (ch. 31)
9. Allotment of the two tribes and a half in the east of the Jordan (ch. 32)
10. List of the stations in the wilderness (ch. 33)

11. The appointed boundaries of the land and the names of the surveyors (ch. 34)
12. Law concerning the cities of refuge (ch. 35)
13. Laws respecting inheritances for preserving the succession of estates and the distinction of families (ch. 36)