

Numbers

Only a year has passed since the exodus from Egypt when the Book of Numbers opens. Numbers, the book of divine discipline, shows the painful consequences of unbelief and irresponsible decisions on the part of God's chosen people. Numbers begins with the old generation (chapters 1-12) and moves through a tragic transition period (chapters 13-20). It ends with the new generation (chapters 21-36) poised at the doorstep to the land of Canaan. The book contains the records of two generations, two censuses, and two sets of instructions for enjoying the land of promise. God's love is kind, but it can also be severe. His people must learn they can move forward only as they trust and depend on Him.

INTRODUCTION

Numbers is the book of wanderings. It takes its name from the two numberings of the Israelites—the first at Mount Sinai and the second on the plains of Moab. Most of the book, however, describes Israel's experiences as they wander in the wilderness. The lesson of Numbers is clear. While it may be necessary to pass through wilderness experiences, one does not have to live there. For Israel, an eleven-day journey became a forty-year agony.

The title of Numbers comes from the first word in the Hebrew text, *Wayyedabber*, "And He said." Jewish writings, however, usually refer to it by the fifth Hebrew word in 1:1, *Bemidbar*, "In the Wilderness," which more nearly indicates the content of the book. The Greek title is *Arithmoi*, "Numbers." Numbers has also been referred to as the "Book of the Journeyings," the "Book of the Murmurings," and the "Fourth Book of Moses."

AUTHOR

The evidence that points to Moses as the author of Numbers is similar to that for the previous books of the Pentateuch. These five books form such a literary unit that they rise or fall together on the matter of authorship.

DATE & SETTING

Leviticus covers only one month, but Numbers covers almost thirty-nine years (c. 1444-405 b.c.). It records Israel's movement from the last twenty days at Mount Sinai (1:1; 10:11), the wandering around Kadesh-barnea, and finally the arrival in the plains of Moab in the fortieth year (see 22:1; 26:3; 33:50; Deut. 1:3).

Their tents occupy several square miles whenever they camp since there are probably over two-and-a-half million people (based on the census figures in chapters 1 and 26). God miraculously feeds and sustains them in the desert. He preserves their clothing, gives them manna, meat, water, leaders, and a promise (14:34).