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## Lesson 1

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# Background and Survey

Using correct Bible study procedure, we shall first acquaint ourselves with the background of the writing of Numbers, this fourth book of God's inspired writings; next we shall take a "sky-scraper" view of the book; then we will be ready to analyze the individual parts. ("Image the whole; then execute the parts.")

### **I. BACKGROUND**

#### **A. The Name**

Numbers derives its name from the two numberings, or censuses, of two different generations of the Israelites. The first was taken of the generation that left Sinai (chap. 1), and the second was taken of those who renewed the journey to Canaan (chap. 26). Other more appropriate titles, such as "In the Wilderness," have been given this book, but "Numbers" remains the standard title, having come down to the English Bible from early Greek and Latin versions.

#### **B. The Author**

External and internal evidences point conclusively to Mosaic authorship of all five books of the Pentateuch, which includes Numbers. Moses certainly was the logical choice of God to record this story, since he was the chief eye-witness to the events.

#### **C. The Date**

The events of Numbers followed those of Leviticus. The time span of the action of Leviticus was only one month, and Moses could have written that book before he left Sinai for the next stage of the

journey to Canaan. The time span of Numbers is almost thirty-nine years. (Cf. Num. 1:1; 33:38; Deut. 1:3.) Moses wrote Numbers when he was at Moab with his people, toward the end of his life at the close of the fifteenth century B.C.

**D. Relation of Numbers to the Pentateuch**

The following study suggests interesting comparisons of the five books of the Pentateuch, as concerns some of their prominent teachings (other comparisons are made in this series' study books on Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus):

GENESIS	EXODUS	LEVITICUS	NUMBERS	DEUTERONOMY
Election	Redemption	Communion	Probation	Instruction
Promise	Pardon	Purity	Pilgrimage	Prospects

From what you know now of the contents of each book, show how the above words are representative of the books.

**II. SURVEY**

There are three main stages of survey study: (1) making the initial acquaintance; (2) scanning the prominent individual items; and (3) searching for the integrating relationships. Keep in mind that the purpose of survey study is to see the book as a whole.

**A. Stage one: Making initial acquaintance**

Read through the book of Numbers to get the feel and atmosphere of the book and to catch its major purposes. Write down your impressions of the book, and any key words and phrases that stand out.

**B. Stage two: Scanning individual items**

1. Go through the book once again (a cursory reading is sufficient here) to secure segment or chapter titles; then record them on a horizontal chart. (Note: Refer to the survey chart, shown on p. 9, to obtain locations of segment divisions, but avoid studying the remainder of the chart at this time.) Remember that these titles are

only *clue* phrases as to content and are not intended to serve as an organized outline.

2. Compare the first and last verses of Numbers, noting especially the geography. Refer to the map shown on page 11.
3. Recall what was said earlier in this lesson about the two censuses. Where do they appear in Numbers?

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Why *two* numberings?

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4. Read 10:11-13. Why does this begin a new section in the action of Numbers?
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Chapters 13 and 14 might be considered the pivotal chapters of Numbers. In what way does the movement of the action of the book turn here?

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5. What was the “prize” God had offered the Israelites?
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In view of this, how appropriate is 10:29 as a key verse?

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6. Write out a list of the main persons and actions of Numbers that you recall from your survey study thus far.
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### **C. Stage three: Seeking integrating relationships**

Each book of the Bible may be studied as a single unit, with its many individual parts related to each other. In the survey study of a book we are trying to see how its various parts fit into the outline of the whole book. An important part of this study is to discover groupings of material of common content. Let us do that now for Numbers.

NUMBERS JOURNEY TO GOD'S REST-LAND

Two Key Verses:  
10:9 and 10:29

Two Key Verses:  
10:9 and 10:29

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10-11	11	12	12:16	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21:4	22:2	22:41	23:13	23:27	24:10	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	33:50	35	36																																			
NUMBERED									TO MOAB									AT MOAB																																																						
PREPARATION for the JOURNEY									THE JOURNEY									AT THE GATE TO THE LAND																																																						
INVENTORY AND ASSIGNMENTS			PURGINGS, PRESENTATIONS, FINAL INSTRUCTIONS						SINAI TO KADESH	DESERT WANDERINGS			KADESH TO MOAB			NEW PROBLEMS			FINAL PREPARATIONS			CONCLUDING TASKS																																																		
—few weeks—									—about 39 years—									—few months—																																																						
AT SINAI									THE JOURNEY									AT THE GATE TO THE LAND																																																						

TRIBE OF LEVI  
PITCHED

1. First, see how much you can do on your own before looking at the survey chart shown on page 9. The best place to begin is to look for the outline of geography in Numbers. Then associate Israel's general experiences at these geographical areas, and you will have discovered the main thrust of the story of Numbers. Record your studies on your own survey chart.

2. Look for other related studies or outlines in the book and record them. Make a comparative study of the significances of the three mounts: Mt. Sinai (chaps. 1-10); Mt. Hor (chap. 20); and Mt. Nebo (chap. 27).

3. Decide on a good title for Numbers, one that will accurately reveal the major theme of the book.

4. When you have finished your own original study, study the accompanying survey chart and compare it with your own findings.

Two important observations should be made here:

1. The Israelites in Moab at the close of the book, waiting to enter Canaan, are a later generation than the ones preparing for the journey at the opening of the book. This was because of God's judgment for the people's sin of unbelief and disobedience (chaps. 13-14).

2. Although the middle section of Numbers covers a span of about thirty-nine years, the text records little of the events of these years of wanderings. They were literally years of waste and void, giving awesome testimony to the fact of divine judgment for sin.

\* \* \*

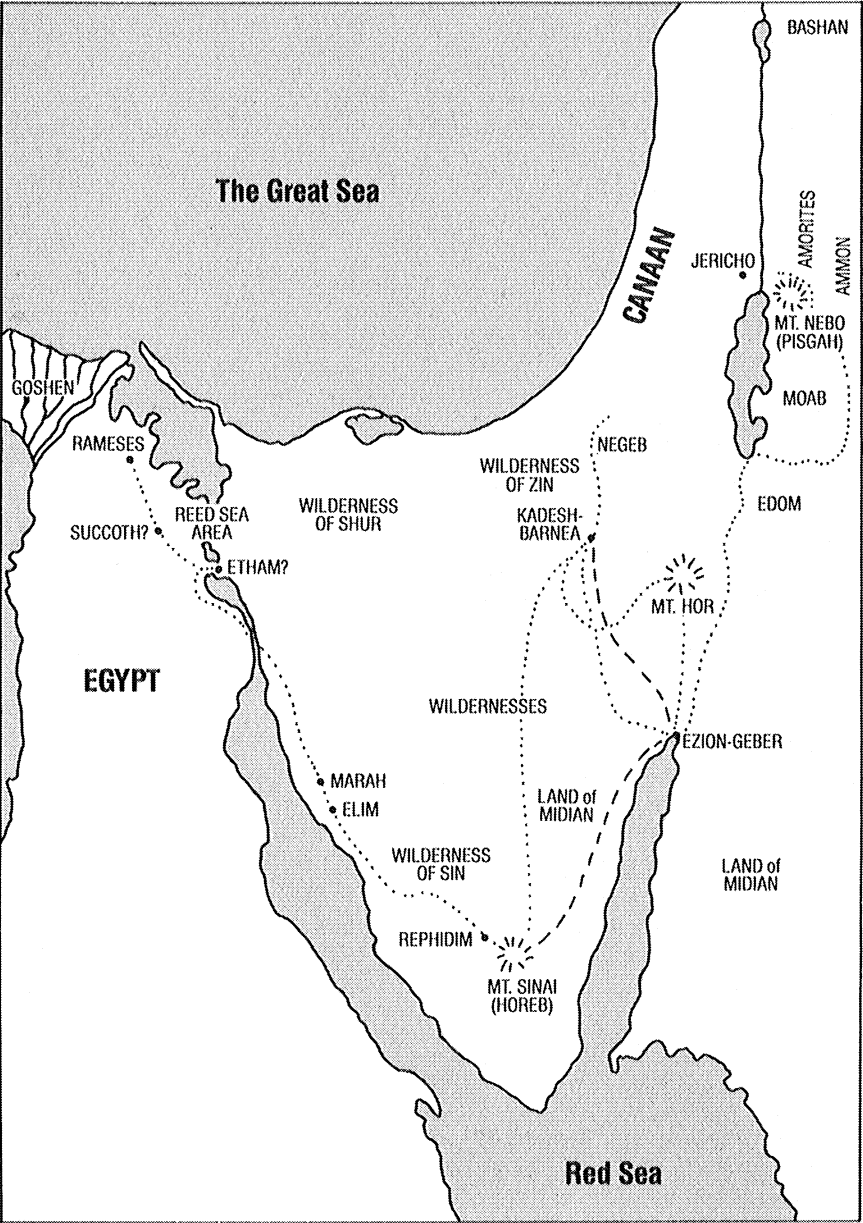
Before leaving this lesson, we should alert ourselves as to what areas of spiritual truth we may expect Numbers to emphasize. Here are a few of the more prominent:

1. Truths about God. Numbers has a lot to say about God—His grace, power, holiness, long-suffering, righteous judgments, and many other aspects.

2. Truths about God's people. Much is revealed of the weakness of the flesh: tendencies to murmur, doubt, and forgetting the blessings of God, to mention only a few.

3. Truths about the blessed everyday living that God wants His children to enjoy. To fully appreciate this spiritual lesson, read chapters 3 and 4 of Hebrews. The "rest" of these chapters is not heaven but the normal, God-willed, Spirit-filled daily life of the Christian. Since Canaan is spoken of as that rest-land, Christians may learn much from the experiences of the Israelites on their journey to God's rest-land.

**GEOGRAPHY of NUMBERS and DEUTERONOMY**



## Inventory and Assignments

**T**he first major geographical division of Numbers is “at Sinai,” for the Israelites were still there as the story begins. They had been encamped for a whole year. During that year they built the Tabernacle, and God instructed them about His will in a multitude of matters. He left them in doubt about nothing. He told them exactly how He would have them conduct themselves toward Himself and toward each other, even in minute details. The year of instruction was finished. It was God’s will for them to march into the land and put all these precepts into practice. In this section (chaps. 1-10) He was getting them ready to move on.

On our survey chart we have called the section 1:1–10:10 PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY. Observe from the chart that only a few weeks were required to get this vast multitude of people in readiness for the journey. The important tasks of preparation were:

Inventory and assignments (1:1–4:49)

Purgings, presentations, and final instructions (5:1–10:10).

Lessons 2 and 3 are devoted to these two sections, respectively.

### I. ANALYSIS

Read through the four chapters of this lesson in one sitting, observing the groupings of subjects and underlining prominent words and phrases in your Bible for later reference.

1. What one thing about the instructions and procedures of these chapters strikes you as being prominent?

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2. *Chapter 1.* What group among the Israelites was counted?

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What was the final tally?

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From this, try to estimate the total population of Israel.

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In view of such a vast multitude, what would normally be the problems of a march through a semiarid wilderness?

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Are miracles of God adequate for such problems?

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Why were the Levites exempt from war (vv. 47-53)?

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3. *Chapter 2.* Record on a sheet of paper the positions allotted to the tribes and the Tabernacle in the camp of Israel. (Note: The camp was spread over an area of many square miles.) Notice the references in the chapter to marching. What spiritual lessons may be learned from this chapter?

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4. *Chapters 3 and 4.* These chapters deal with the ministry of the Tabernacle. Why is so much importance assigned to the Tabernacle?

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What was the relationship of the Levites to the priests? (3:6, 9)

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What was the relationship of the Levites to the Lord? (3:13)

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Do you suppose there was any relationship between the Levites being chosen by God to serve the Tabernacle and their earlier response to Moses in connection with the golden calf (Ex. 32:25-29)?

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(Note: You may have observed that the total census of the Levites is given at 3:39, 46 as 22,000, whereas the subtotals of vv. 22, 28, and 34 add up to 22,300. This may be accounted for by a scribal

omission of one Hebrew letter in v. 28, reading 8,600 instead of the correct 8,300. Whatever the explanation, the 22,000 total is considered accurate.)

What was the difference between the two numberings of the Levites as found in chapters 3 and 4?

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5. Can any spiritual lessons be learned from the fact of the numbering of a people, as found in these chapters? If so, what?

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Write out a list of ten other lessons taught by these chapters of Numbers.

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## II. COMMENTS

One is struck with the contrast between the book of Numbers and the book of Leviticus. In Leviticus the text is occupied primarily with worship, but the first thing that confronts us in Numbers is preparation for war. Today Christians are also engaged in battle. True, our “wrestling” is not against flesh and blood; but we have just as real and fierce a warfare on hand against the principalities, powers, and rulers of this world’s darkness. (See Eph. 6:10-18.)

Note on the chart the results of the census that Moses took at Sinai. Observe the relative strength of the tribes when they started on their journey—Judah the largest, Dan next, then Simeon, Zebulun, and so forth. At the end of the book a similar census was taken, and it is interesting to compare the two numberings in order to see which tribes increased and which tribes decreased during the thirty-eight years of wandering.

The list shows the twelve tribes that were descended from the twelve sons of Jacob; but the names of two of Jacob’s sons, Levi and Joseph, do not appear. In their place, however, appear the names of Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, whom Jacob

1. Reuben .....	46,500	7. Ephraim .....	40,500
2. Simeon .....	59,300	8. Manasseh .....	32,200
3. Gad .....	45,650	9. Benjamin .....	35,400
4. Judah .....	74,600	10. Dan .....	62,700
5. Issachar .....	54,400	11. Asher .....	41,500
6. Zebulun .....	57,400	12. Naphtali .....	53,400
		Total .....	603,550

adopted just before his death. (See Gen. 48:5-6.) Thus Joseph, the beloved son, is twice represented in the congregation.

Levi was not numbered among the warriors because there was a special work appointed for that tribe (Num. 1:47-53). This was a great honor to be conferred upon the house of Levi. When Moses came down from the mountain and found the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, he called for those who were on the Lord's side to take their stand by him. All the sons of Levi gathered themselves to Moses; they would not soil their hands with calf worship. As a result, their hands and theirs alone were appointed to touch God's sacred dwelling place.

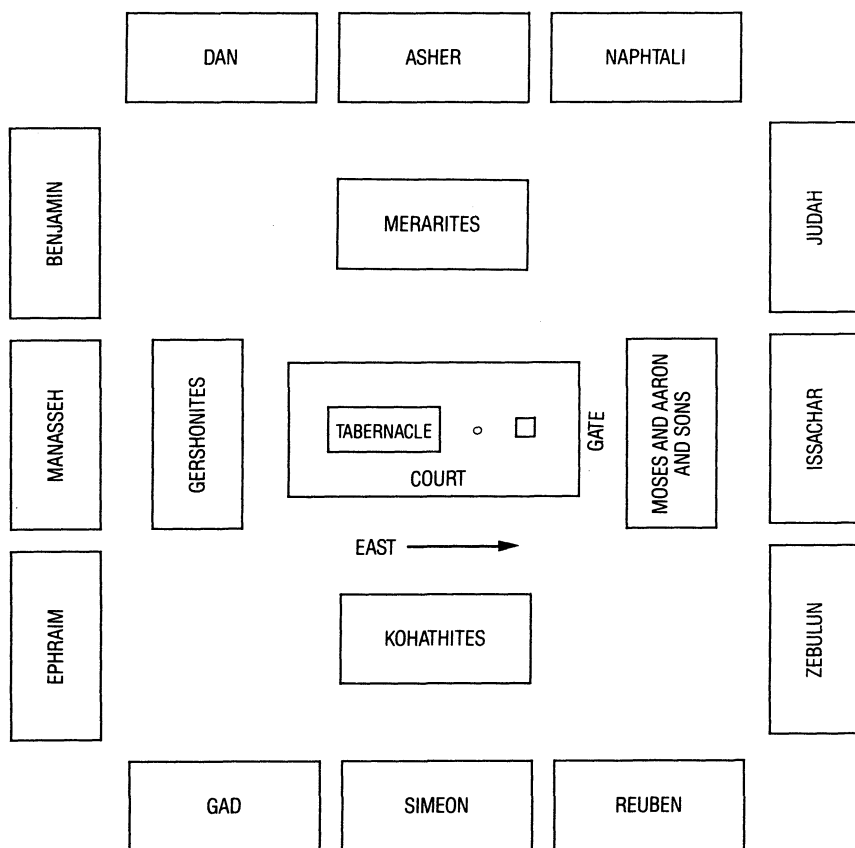
In the second and third chapters we are shown the arrangement of the camp. The following diagram gives that probable arrangement. Notice that the Tabernacle had the preeminent central position.

The Israelites were instructed not only on the order of encampment but also on the order of march. In both phases of their journey the Tabernacle was to be central, for God was to be the center of all their living. They were never without this constant visible reminder along the journey.

Observe the assignments that the Levites were given concerning the Tabernacle. The Gershonites had the care of such as the curtains; the Kohathites, the furniture; and the Merarites, the boards (3:25-37). Each Levite knew exactly which piece of the Tabernacle he was responsible for. When the signal was given to move, each man took up his piece and moved on. Thus the Tabernacle was quickly and easily moved without confusion or delay. Each had something to do. It was not left to a few to bear the whole burden. So today, each believer has been given his special place and work for God.

Each Levite understood that the part of the Tabernacle assigned to his care was the work that the Lord had given him to do. A Levite, for example, could not abandon his work just because he thought the bearing of the badger skins was unattractive or the carrying of the pins insignificant.

What work in the vineyard of God has been assigned to you? Is it some obscure work that you sometimes consider monoto-



nous or insignificant or unattractive? If God has given it to you to do, it is not insignificant; therefore it should not be monotonous or unattractive. It has been wisely spoken, “Every one is not privileged to do magnificent things, but every one is privileged to do little things magnificently.” Nothing is insignificant when done for the glory of God.

### III. SUMMARY

The order of business recorded by these chapters of Numbers concerned the major items of the Israelites’ preparation for their sojourn to Canaan. First of all, there was the *organization for the journey*, which entailed:

1. Census of *warriors*: 603,550—for war
2. Assignments of *positions*: 12 tribes and the Tabernacle—in camp and on march

Then provision was made for the *care of the* Tabernacle and its furniture:

1. Census of *workers*: 22,000 Levites (1 month upward)  
8,580 Levites (30-50 years)
2. Assignments of *duties*: care and transport of the Tabernacle