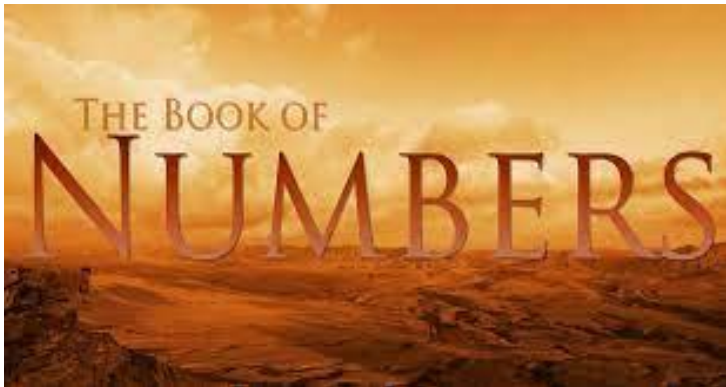


-Save This Page as a PDF-

## Numbers from a Messianic Jewish Perspective

*To Arnold Fruchtenbaum, who introduced me to a Jewish Messianic perspective when approaching the Scriptures.  
I will forever be indebted.*

The book of **Numbers** takes its English name from the Septuagint which calls it *Arithmoi*, or **Numbers**. The reason for this is that the book contains many statistics such as tribal population figures, the totals of the priests and **Levites**, and other numerical data. The Hebrew name is *b<sup>e</sup>midbar*, the fifth word in the book, and means *in the wilderness*. To see a short video summarizing the book of **Numbers** click [here](#).



**Authorship:** Universal Jewish and Christian tradition attributes the book of **Numbers** (along with the rest of the Pentateuch) to **Moses**, though little in **Numbers** explicitly confirms it, with the exception of **33:2** and **36:13**. Even critical scholars admit that Numbers is an inseparable part of the Pentateuch though, as is well known, they deny its Mosaic authorship. **Moses** is certainly the principal figure in the book and throughout he is a participant in and eyewitness to most of its major events. Without the subject and circular arguments employed by most source critics and redaction critics it is unlikely that any view of authorship other than Mosaic would ever have occurred to most readers.

**Date:** The last verse in the book of **Numbers** states: **These are the mitzvot and rulings which ADONAI gave through Moshe to the people of Isra'el in the plains of Mo'av by the Jordan, across from Jericho (36:13)**. This implies that the journey through **the wilderness** had been completed and that **Isra'el** was about to enter the land of Canaan.

Crossing the Jordan occurred forty years after **the Exodus (Joshua 5:6)**, an event to be dated 1446 BC. Therefore, the book of **Numbers** must be dated about 1406 BC, obviously before **Moses'** death which also took place in that year.

**Purpose:** The book of **Numbers** seems to be an instruction manual to post-Sinai **Isra'el**. The "manual" deals with three areas: (1) how the nation was to order itself **in** its **wilderness** wanderings; (2) how the priests and Levites were to function with the Tabernacle moving from place to place, and (3) how they were to prepare themselves for the conquest of Canaan and their settled lives there. The narrative sections, of which there are many, demonstrate the successes and failures of **ADONAI's** people as they conformed and did not conform to the mitzvot of the Torah. The fact that the book covers the nearly forty-year period from the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai until the eve of the Conquest, points to its character as history. But it is more than a mere recording of history. It's history with the purpose of describing **God's** expectations and **Isra'el's** reactions in a unique era, when the nation had **the LORD's** promise of the Land but had not yet experienced its fulfillment.<sup>1</sup> This book is really about **God's** faithfulness, despite our shortcomings. **Numbers** is a very practical book, so it not only needs to be read, but lived.

**Chiasm and Introversion:** The main structural device, to judge by its attention in nearly every chapter of **Numbers**, is chiasm and introversion. Chiasm is named after the Greek letter X and denotes a pair of items that reverses itself, yielding the structure **A-B-B-A**. When there is a series of more than two members -for example **A-B-C-C-B-A**, then the term is purely an aesthetic device, the introversion can have teaching implications. In the scheme of **A-B-C-B-A**, the central member frequently contains the main point, climaxing what precedes and anticipating what follows. There are simple chiasms (**14:2**), chiasms in subsequent repetition (**32:16** and **32:24**), chiasms in summation (**30:17**), chiasms with introversion in a speech (**11:11-15**), introversion in poetry (**12:6-8**), chiasms within introversion (**33:52-56**), and larger units (**6:1-21**) and (**5:11-31**) for example.<sup>2</sup>

**Anticipatory Passages:** Another distinctive literary technique seen in **Numbers** is the divulging of information that is clearly irrelevant to its context but that prepares the reader for what follows. They should be considered integral to the composition of the book. There can be no doubt that anticipation is a key technique in the book. It piques the curiosity of the reader, sustains his attentiveness, and prods him to read on so that he can discover the full meaning later in the text.<sup>3</sup>

**Key verse:** For I, **ADONAI**, live among the people of **Isra'el** (**35:34**).

**Composition:** The simplest way to look at the book is to recognize that it is divided into five

sections - three wilderness locations broken up by two road trips that tie everything together: **Sinai (Chapters 1-10)** . . . travel (**Chapters 10-12**) . . . **Paran (Chapters 13-19)** . . . travel (**Chapters 20-21**) . . . **Mo'ab (Chapters 22-36)**.

**Journey through the Wilderness: a Contemporary Theme:** The book of **Numbers**, the fourth book of the Torah, derives its name from the census lists of the number of people in each of the twelve tribes of **Isra'el** in **Numbers Chapters 1** and **26**. It is the story of the people of **Isra'el in the wilderness** as they travel from the slavery of Egypt toward the freedom of Canaan. The image of “**wilderness**” has been a powerful metaphor for describing the experience of many people and communities, both ancient and modern. **Isaiah** used the image to describe the promise of **Isra'el's** return from its Babylonian exile. **YHVH** promised something new: **I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert (Isaiah 43:19)**. In the B'rit Chadashah, **John the Immerser** was a **voice crying out in the wilderness** to prepare the way of **the Lord**. **John** spoke from the outer margins of the wilderness into a world where power was concentrated in the hands of the few (**Luke 3:1-2**). **Yeshua** was tested and tempted **in the wilderness** by Satan for forty days, an echo of ancient **Isra'el's** sojourn and testing **in the wilderness** for forty years (**Luke**). Jews throughout the centuries have found a resonance with the theme of living **in the wilderness** in times of exile, persecution, and diaspora. **The wilderness** theme has reemerged as a way of capturing the experience of many people in our world today. Among all the books of the Bible, the book of **Numbers** is a particularly helpful resource for recapturing this **wilderness** concept and its many implications for a postmodern world.<sup>4</sup>

**The Use of the Complete Jewish Bible:** Because I am writing this commentary on the book of **Numbers** from a **Jewish** perspective, I will be using *the Complete Jewish Bible* unless otherwise indicated.

**The use of ADONAI:** Long before **Yeshua's** day, the word **ADONAI** had, out of respect, been substituted in speaking and in reading aloud for **God's** personal name, the four Hebrew letters *yod-heh-vav-heh*, variously written in English as **YHVH**. **The Talmud (Pesachim 50a)** made it a requirement not to pronounce the Tetragrammaton, meaning the four-letter name of **the LORD**, *Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey*, since the ancient manuscripts do not give any vowel sounds, and this remains the rule in most modern **Jewish** settings. In deference to this tradition, which is unnecessary but harmless, I will be using **ADONAI** where **YHVH** is meant. In ancient times when the scribes were translating the Hebrew Scriptures, they revered the name of **YHVH** so much that they would use a quill to make one stroke of the name and then throw it away. Then they would make another stroke and throw that quill away until the name was completed. **His** name became so sacred to

them that they started to substitute the phrase *the Name*, instead of writing or pronouncing **His Name**. Over centuries of doing this, the actual letters and pronunciation of **His Name** were lost. The closest we can come is **YHVH**, with no vowels. The pronunciation has been totally lost. Therefore, the name Yahweh is only a guess of what the original name sounded like. Both **ADONAI** and **Ha'Shem** are substitute names for **YHVH**. **ADONAI** is more of an affectionate name like *daddy*, while **Ha'Shem** is a more formal name like *sir*. Therefore, Jews, being respectful of the Third Commandment, use these words as replacements. **The Talmud explains, "In the Sanctuary, the Name was pronounced as written; but beyond its confines a substitute Name was employed (Tractate Sotah VII.6). God has only one name, YHVH. All His other "names" like ADONAI Elohei-Tzva'ot, ADONAI Elohim, ADONAI Nissi, ADONAI Tzidkenu, and ADONAI-Tzva'ot, merely reflect His attributes.**

Contrary to what some religious groups say today, no one can say with confidence how to pronounce **God's Name**. The "name" Jehovah, for example, is a made up word by a Franciscan monk in the dark ages. He took **YHVH**, and inserted vowels between the known letters to invent a new word: **YeHoVaH**. Jews never, NEVER, use this made up word. The last book of the B'rit Chadashah tells us that when **Yeshua** returns to the earth, **He** will reveal **the Name that no one knew but Himself (Revelation 19:12)**. It seems best to leave this lost pronunciation unresolved until the **Messiah** comes.

**The use of TaNaKh:** The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters **T** (for "Torah"), **N** (for "Nevi'im," the Prophets), and **K** (for "Ketuvim," the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term "Old Covenant" implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Jesus Himself** said: **Don't think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB)**. I will be using the Hebrew acronym **TaNaKh** instead of the phrase the Old Testament, throughout this devotional commentary.

**The Use of the phrase, "the righteous of the TaNaKh," rather than using Old Testament saints:** Messianic synagogues, and the **Jewish** messianic community in general, never use the phrase Old Testament saints. From a **Jewish** perspective, they prefer to use the phrase, "righteous of **the TaNaKh**." Therefore, I will be using "the righteous of **the TaNaKh**," rather than Old Testament saints throughout this devotional commentary.

**Genesis is the book of beginnings; Exodus shows the giving of the Torah and exit from Egypt; Leviticus is an addendum to Exodus, giving the sacrifices and allowing**

**the Israelites to draw near to God; Numbers records the death of the rebellious Exodus generation, and the hope of a new wilderness generation.**