

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES ON THE BOOK OF NUMBERS¹

1. **INTRODUCTION:** "Numbers, then, covers a span of thirty-eight years and nine months, the period of *wilderness wanderings*'...An obvious purpose of the book is to record the period from the encounter with God at Sinai to the preparations in Moab to enter the promised land. However, far more than this is involved. **The journey from Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea by way of the Gulf of Aqaba would normally have taken only eleven days** (Dt. 1:2). The direct route would consume a few days less, and by way of Edom and Moab hardly more than a couple of weeks. **The narrative makes clear that the thirty-eight-year period was punishment for lack of faith: none of the unbelieving generation was allowed to enter the land** (Num. 14:20-45; cf. Deut. 1:35f.). Numbers, therefore, is not a mere bit of ancient history but another recital of the acts of Yahweh. **It is a complex story of unfaithfulness, rebellion, apostasy and frustration, set against the background of God's faithfulness, presence, provision, and forbearance.**" (LaSor, et al., p. 99).
2. **CONTENTS.**
 1. **NAME** - "Originally the book had no title. **The translators of the LXX gave it the name 'Numbers' because of its census lists**; that title was passed on through the Vulgate to the European and English versions. **Its name in the Hebrew Bible, taken from the words in the first verse, is, 'In the wilderness of** (Sinai).' This title suited the setting of chs. 1-10. An earlier title, coined by rabbis, called it 'The one-fifth (of the Torah [Law]) dealing with the Mustered,' again featuring the census lists (chs. 1-4; 26)." (Ibid, p. 100).
 2. **OUTLINE** - "The book divides into three main portions, each centered in a geographical setting to mark the main stages of the wilderness march...
 1. **Sinai** -
 1. "Preparations for departure" - 1:1-10:10
 2. "Conclusion: Journey from Sinai to Kadesh" - 10:11-12:16
 2. **Kadesh** -
 1. "In the wilderness of Paran" - 13:1-20:13
 2. "Conclusion: Journey from Kadesh to the Plains" - 20:14-22:1
 3. **Moab** -
 1. "Preparations for Canaan" - 22:2-32:42
 2. "Conclusion: a backward & forward look" - 33:1-36:13 (Ibid, p. 101)
 3. **ATTACKS ON MOSAIC AUTHORSHIP OF NUMBERS.** "With the rise of historical and literary analysis of the Bible came a variety of challenges to (the idea that Moses wrote the book), with some scholars denying any historical validity to the book. **Today, on the contrary, considerable support exists for the view that Numbers incorporates much historical material...** These are some of the elements of the problem:

¹ Supplemental notes compiled by Mike Edwards. I have taken virtually all of these thoughts & quotes from two sources: "A Survey of Old Testament Introduction," by Gleason Archer, Jr. Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1994-revised edition, & "Old Testament Survey-The Message, Form & Background of the Old Testament," by William Sanford LaSor, David Hubbard & Frederic Wm. Bush. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1982, 1996-2nd edition. Note: Words in brackets and those in parentheses, added by me. -mwe

1. No mention is made of the book's author. Num. 33:2 indicates that *'Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the LORD,'* but this is the only reference to Moses' literary activity. Throughout the book, he is described in the third person. **ANSWER:** (But) It could be argued (and, indeed, has been) that Moses, like Caesar, could write of himself in the third person." (Ibid, pp. 101-102).

2. Is the material in the book "late?" "In some cases, scholars conclude that later practices are reflected."(Ibid, p. 102). **ANSWER:** (However), **in fact, there are several good evidences that the material in Numbers was written when it purports to have been:**
 1. "The early material demonstrates intimate knowledge of the wilderness, the Israelite people, and their constant complainings and disparagement of Moses, as well as much descriptive material about Moses himself." (Ibid)
 2. "Recent studies of lists of place names in Egyptian texts from the late Bronze Age (the probable period of the Exodus) **confirm the accuracy of the itinerary listed in Num. 33:44-49.** The validity of this list had previously been questioned for lack of archaeological evidence of the cities listed." (Ibid)
 3. "Ancient rites, the practice or significance of which seems later to have disappeared, are preserved in 5:11-22 and 19:1-22." (Ibid)
 4. "Quotations from 'The Book of the Wars of Yahweh' (21:14f., 17f., 27-30) also appear to be from an old source. **In particular, several poetic passages (such as the utterances of Balaam in chs. 23-24) are written in very ancient Hebrew, i.e., thirteenth to tenth century B.C.** Details of geography and historical allusions in the poems, notably 24:23f., may point to the time of the invasion of the Sea Peoples, ca. 1190." (Ibid)
 5. "Even the so-called 'priestly' sections of Numbers frequently dated after the Exile (ca. 500 B.C. [**Note: Only by liberals & opponents of the traditional early date-mwe**]), are now seen to be replete with terms, customs and institutions from Israel's history, **which passed from view or had their meaning changed in the Exile or after.** A recent survey has listed several dozen such examples based on Hebrew usage or Egyptian, Hittite, and Akkadian parallels from the middle of the second millennium B.C. to the early centuries of the first millennium." (Ibid) **In other words, the evidence clearly indicates that Numbers was written when it claims to have been written! Once again, the liberals are wrong!**

4. **INTERPRETING THE BOOK.** "We do well to look at it in terms of horizons of interpretation.
 1. "First, it spoke to the Jews of their past history. It explained why Moses, Aaron, and their generation, redeemed in the Exodus, and commissioned by God at Sinai, did not themselves inherit the promised land.
 2. It also "...spoke to the Jews of their future history. There is a strong word of warning: *'Remain loyal through the generations, and the land that is God's gift you will continue to enjoy.'*" (Ibid, pp. 102-103).

5. **THE NUMBERS IN THE BOOK OF NUMBERS.** The number of Israelite men is listed at 603,550 (Num. 1:45f.). Thus, the entire number of Israelites has been estimated to be around 2-3 million people. "This number is extremely large, and the problems it raises are many and varied... how could such a multitude have been kept in any kind of discipline during the departure from Egypt? How could the wilderness, with little pasture and water, have supported them? ...There are four basic approaches to the problem of numbers (**NOTE: Only the first one is acceptable to those of us who take a conservative, biblical viewpoint!**):

1. "**THE NUMBERS MAY BE TAKEN LITERALLY** ...the Israelites were fruitful and increased greatly (cf. Ex. 1:7, 9-12, 22) ...As for the journey, the Israelites were organized into smaller groups, which tribal leadership could handle. Food and water were miraculously provided as necessary; some suggest that the wilderness was more fertile then, hence capable of supporting more people and flocks... (According to LaSor, et al. -**though I strongly disagree!**) ...there are still some remaining difficulties. (???) For instance, "Most cities that have been excavated cover sites of a few acres that could have housed a few thousand people at the most. At no time would Palestine have had more than a few dozen towns of any significant size" (Ibid, pp.103-105).

However, Dr. Gleason Archer gives some excellent evidence to answer such allegations & spurious attacks on the literal, conservative viewpoint:

1. "Rationalist critics have always rejected the statistics of Numbers as implausibly high and have usually dismissed them as the fabrication of the Priestly School.

(ANSWER): This, of course, is based upon the dubious proposition that the unusual is tantamount to the impossible. (Archer, p. 265)

2. "...but if it be conceded that the census lists in Numbers furnish no evidence for a smaller figure than 600,000 men of military age, can such a huge number of migrants (possibly totaling 2,500,000 when the women and children were included) be thought to have survived for forty years in the Sinai desert? Even granting that the Sinai Peninsula was less arid than in modern times (for it then supported large and powerful tribes like the Amalekites of Ex. 17:8), it would be obviously impossible for such an enormous host... to be sustained in this uncultivated wilderness."

(ANSWER): In answer to this rationalistic objection, **it should be noted that the entire narrative of the Israelite migration frankly concedes that this was a physical impossibility, from the natural standpoint. It emphasizes this in every conceivable way-and so does the later Hebrew literature which recalls the history of Moses (Ps. 78:24; Neh. 9:20, etc... **that the sustaining of this great multitude was a miraculous, supernatural work of God.** The supply of food came from manna (Ex. 16:35), and the water came from the cleft rock (Ex. 17:6), and that too in such abundance as to supply the entire host. This is recorded as a sheer miracle, in terms as forthright and plain as any miracle in**

Scripture. To reject it (i.e. the biblical account) on rationalistic grounds is to impose upon the Bible a philosophical prejudice against miracles, as such, which can never come to terms with the Scripture as the Word of God.

3. "It has been argued by some that it would have taken the entire day for a multitude of two and a half million to get into formation for a line of march, and thus would have been unable to progress a single mile before night closed in upon them. Hence they could not have performed the journeys attributed to them in Numbers 33 and elsewhere.

(ANSWER): But actually the length of time required to fall into marching formation depends entirely upon the width and disposition of the columns themselves. It is not necessary to assume that they kept within the limits of a highway, for example, since they were moving over largely uninhabited range land. The four main divisions of approximately 500,000 each (cf. Num. 10:14-20) might just as well have formed their ranks simultaneously and completed preparations to march within four hours (from 6:00 to 10:00 A.M., for example) and then have completed a good ten miles in four hours before setting up camp again (which in turn might have occupied four hours between 2:00 and 6:00 P.M.).

4. "It has also been objected to the credibility of the record in Numbers that the number of firstborn given in Num. 3:43 is much too low for a male population of over 600,000. There must have been far more than 22,273 firstborn sons in so great a company...

(ANSWER): But this argument, as Delitzsch points out (Pentateuch, 3:9-13) is founded upon the false assumption that the law (Num. 3:46-47) which required the sanctification of firstborn males was intended to operate retroactively. **Nothing in the context suggests that any more are involved than those who were born between the event of the Exodus itself and this episode (thirteen months later) when the census was being taken.** On the basis of 603,550 males, the probable number of males between twenty and thirty years of age would be about 190,000, more or less. **This would yield an average number of new marriages per year of about 19,000. From this number of marriages, many of which would allow for two gestation periods in eighteen months, a figure in excess of 22,000 male births would hardly be excessive.**" (Archer, pp. 267-268).

5. "Others have objected that the supply of quails furnished to the Israelite host according to Num. 11:31 is absolutely incredible. A quantity of quail piled up over such an area for a depth of two cubits would result in about 70,000 bushels of quail per Israelite per meal.

(ANSWER): This, however, is a total misunderstanding of what the Hebrew text says. It does not state that the quail comprised a heap of

bodies two cubits deep; it only indicates that the quail were deflected downward by a driving wind to a height of two cubits (about three feet) above the surface of the ground, where they could easily be knocked down by the meat-hungry Israelites. (The preposition 'all' before the phrase 'the face of the earth' may just as well be translated 'above' as 'upon' in a context where horizontal motion is involved.

6. **"There are several other arguments of this character** (cf., ISBE, 4:2168-69), **but none of them stand up under analysis any better than do those which have just been treated.** Many other critical attacks upon the book depend entirely upon the acceptance of Wellhausian presuppositions for their cogency.
7. "Finally, a word should be said about a much cited 'proof text' appealed to by Documentarian Critics (i.e. liberal advocates of the now discredited "JEDP" theory) to disprove Mosaic authorship. It is argued that Moses could never have written Num. 12:3 about himself (*Now Moses was very meek, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth*'). If Moses was truly humble, how could he have written such a laudatory judgment concerning himself?

(ANSWER): A good answer to this is found in the New Bible Commentary: **'Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Moses did not hesitate to record his own sins and weaknesses in the clearest of language. It would be contrary to the remarkable objectivity of the Bible if he did not also record his strongest point, his meekness... (The contents of this verse) are necessary to a true understanding of this chapter.'**

2. **"THE FIGURES IN NUMBERS REPRESENT A 'MISPLACED' CENSUS LIST FROM THE TIME OF THE MONARCHY. This hypothesis does not really deal with the basic problem, but simply shifts it to a later period."** (Ibid, p. 105) (It should be added that this whole idea is based on the liberal "Documentary" hypothesis, which is bankrupt. So this idea is worthless-*mwe*)
3. **"THE WORD TRANSLATED 'THOUSANDS' CAN ALSO BE TRANSLATED 'TRIBES,' OR, WITH SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT VOCALIZATION, 'CHIEFTAINS.'** This attempt to solve the problem without doing violence to the biblical text was suggested by a pioneer archaeologist and more recently revised." (Ibid) **[I (*mwe*) would consider this explanation totally unacceptable! Gleason Archer, again makes some good comments & gives some solid reasons why we should reject this fairly new theory]:**
 1. "There has been a tendency among some of the more recent scholars to explain the statistics of the Hebrew text by reinterpreting the word for 'thousand' ('eleph) as simply equivalent to family or clan. It is true that there is an 'eleph' which means family or clan (Judg. 6:15; I Sam. 10:19, etc.); **but it is very clear from the numeration chapters (Num. 1-4; 26) that**

'eleph' is intended in the sense of 'thousand,' for the smaller unit below this 'eleph is me'at, 'hundreds' (so Num. 1:21, 23, 25, etc.).

2. "The most that a 'family' could contribute to the national army (if one holds to this new theory) would be four or five men on the average, and **it would be absurd to suppose that 'hundreds' would be mentioned as the next lower numerical unit after an average contingent of five men each.**
3. "Actually, the advocates of this view that 'eleph' equals 'family contingent' assume that these passages in Numbers were taken from ancient fragmentary records of an old census... misunderstood and reworked by later traditionists, or by the priestly editors themselves. These latter contributors, then, would be responsible for the lower figures (hundreds, tens and digits) tacked on after the original numerations of 'families.'" (Archer, pp. 265-66). [**ANSWER: Before even looking at this further, it should be pointed out that this kind of explanation assumes some form of the documentary theory as a starting point, and that theory, as mentioned earlier, is totally bankrupt. So, the whole basis for this argument & explanation does not exist! (mwe)**]
4. But even if we momentarily forget the false assumptions behind this explanation, Archer points out that this hypothesis... "**...lacks plausibility in the light of the surrounding circumstances.** Assuming that the total of 603,550 given in Num. 1:46 represents an original 603 families averaging five men each, **how can it be supposed that a male population of 3,015 could have put the king of Egypt in fear because of their overwhelming numbers? (!!!) Yet Pharaoh is made to say in Ex. 1:9, 'Behold, the people of Israel are more and mightier than we.'** But usually the advocates of this view...understand 'eleph' in the sense of 'family complex' or 'clan,'...and increase the (number) to fifty rather than a mere five. **And yet even this treatment would result in a total fighting force of only 30,150, scarcely a formidable contingent in the midst of the highly populated Delta of Egypt.**² Furthermore, even a (so-called, by the liberals) J passage like Ex. 12:37 gives the same total in round numbers as Num. 1:46 (i.e., 600,000), and the same is true of Num. 11:21, a (so-called) J-E section. Further corroboration is given by the total amount of ransom money-at the rate of a half shekel apiece-recorded in Ex. 38:25 as 100 talents, 1775 shekels. Since there were 3000 shekels to the talent, **this comes out to exactly 603,550 contributors.** (!) It is therefore safe to say that no objective handling of the textual evidence can possibly sustain the thesis

² "In the Eighteenth Dynasty the Delta region of Lower Egypt was divided into twenty nomes, or administrative districts, whereas all the rest of the kingdom to the First Cataract numbered only twenty-two. Thus it would be fair to infer that anywhere from one third to one half of the entire population of Egypt resided in the Delta. This does not mean, however, that all of this extensive territory was as well settled as it became in later times (some districts now contain 2000 inhabitants per square mile). Some of it was marshy and wild and used largely for cattle grazing even until Ptolemaic times. Nevertheless, the population of Lower Egypt in the Eighteenth Dynasty must have numbered several million." (Archer, fn. p. 266).

that 'eleph' in Numbers signifies anything less than a literal thousand." (Archer, p. 266).

4. Another bogus argument: "THE NUMBERS ARE PART OF THE EPIC STYLE OF NARRATIVE, INTENDED TO EXPRESS THE MAJESTY AND MIRACLE OF THE DELIVERANCE FROM EGYPT. In this view, they are 'not meant to be understood either strictly literally or as extant in a corrupt textual form (**Note: This is a totally unacceptable viewpoint which every Bible believer must reject!-mwe**)... To some students of the Bible, this is no solution, but rather an evasion of the problem." (LaSor, et al., pp. 105-106). **-I would suggest it is, or should be a MAJOR problem to ALL serious students of the Bible, since it attacks the very character & claims of Scripture!-mwe.**

3. **THEOLOGY.** There are a number of general themes that run throughout the book of Numbers. They include:
 1. "**PRESENCE** - e.g. Dt. 9:15-ff; 12:4-ff. The stories of (God's) continual presence throughout the wilderness period must have been told and retold for generations, for this theme recurs centuries later in the message of the prophets (Hos. 2:14-15; Jer. 2:1-3).
 2. "**THE PROVIDENCE OF YAHWEH** - Numbers highlights this care in three ways:
 1. "The stories of guidance, protection, and material supplies (manna, quail, water, etc.) (10:11-14:45; chs. 16-17; 20-25; 27:12-23; 31:1-33:49)
 2. "The instructions in God's law... The legal provisions outlined in Numbers shaped Israel's worship and judged their disobedience on the journey... (1:1-10:10; ch. 15; chs. 18-19; 26:1-27:11; chs. 28-30; 33:50-36:13);
 3. "The institution of effective patterns of leadership... we can point first to Moses... In response to Moses' plea for a leader to succeed him, Yahweh named Joshua... The Levites... the Nazirites. (11:1-14:45; 16:1-35; 27:12-23)." (Ibid, pp. 107-108)
 3. "**PATIENCE.** Numbers is filled with accounts of the Israelites' grumbling (e.g. 11:1, 5, 33; 12:1; 14:4) (Ibid).
 4. "**INTERCESSION.** 'How can a sinful people have fellowship with a holy God?' The biblical answer includes someone to intercede between them. The priesthood and sacrificial system provided one means of intercession. Numbers also contains several examples of personal intercession (e.g. 12:9-15; 14:13-16" (Ibid, pp. 108-109)

5. **"YAHWEH & THE NATIONS.** i.e. that the Lord was ruler of all nations... **Probably the most graphic lesson... is found in the story of Balak and Balaam...** Balak king of Moab, sought aid from Balaam, a Mesopotamian prophet renowned for his power to pronounce effective curses (22:6)... **this memorable story of a talking donkey contains a deep truth: Israel's Lord is the one who is in charge; even a Mesopotamian prophet, confronted by Yahweh, can speak only what the Lord puts in his mouth.** There is a sequel to the story. Balaam, called *'Balaam son of Beor'* in both accounts (22:5; 31:8), apparently joined himself to the Midianites and enticed Israelites to commit abominable sin against Yahweh by worshipping Baal of Peor (31:16; cf. 25:1-3). This likely involved ritual prostitution (25:6) and was the beginning of the harlotries-both spiritual and physical-that infested Israel throughout the time of the prophets up to the Exile. The Lord commanded Moses to punish the Midianites; and in the brief war, Balaam was slain (31:8) (Ibid, pp. 109-110). **Archer comments:** "Balaam found himself powerless to speak anything but words of promise and blessing in regard to the people of Moses-much to Balak's disgust. His reaction in 24:15-20 was to make even more explicit the coming conquest of Edom and Amalek that Israel would achieve. And then, in verses 22-24 he also predicted the Assyrian conquest of the Hebrews in later generations, and even the invasions of the Greeks and possibly also the Romans, referred to as the people from 'Kittim.' As might be expected, the Documentarian scholars regard these passages as concocted no earlier than the eight century B.C. and connect them with J or E... Supernatural features like a talking donkey and a correct prediction of Israel's future would hardly find acceptance with any rationalist, and so this conjecture is only to be expected..."
- "But it is interesting to observe that an extra-biblical witness about Balaam was discovered at Tell Deir 'Alla, known in Hebrew history as the Valley of Succoth, located not far from the junction of the Jabbok where it joins the Jordan River. In the ruins of an Iron Age II temple at that site some inscribed plaster fragments made reference to Bl'm br B'r ('Balaam son of Beor') who is referred to as hozeh 'elohim ('seer of the gods'). Baruch Levine comments: 'This fact alone, quite apart from the intriguing character of the text as a whole, enhances the realism of Biblical poetry and historiography. An epic figure known only from the Hebrew Bible (and from post-biblical interpretive literature) was, in fact, renowned in the Jordan Valley during the pre-exilic biblical period.'" (Archer, pp. 269-270). So once again, archaeology supports the conservative, fundamental, literal interpretation of the Bible!-mwe**
6. **"STAR-AND-SCEPTER PROPHECY.** ...The prophecy is remarkable for its reference to the dominion of Jacob, but most frequently quoted is that passage which speaks of the star and scepter (v.17)" (Ibid, p. 110). **This very prophecy may have influenced the 'wise men.'** ..."(The) wise men were not fortune-tellers. They were from the East-no doubt, from Persia-where there were many Jews living. They had surely heard of Balaam's prophecy in the Old Testament that *'There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel'* (Num. 24:17). They may very well have had God's revelation that this prophecy was to be fulfilled." (*"The Stars Speak-Astronomy in the Bible,"* Stewart Custer, Bob Jones University Press: Greenville, SC, 1977, p. 81).