

# OpenTheo

## Numbers 33

May 24, 2022



### Alastair Roberts

The wilderness itinerary.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon ([https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref\\_=wl\\_share](https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share)).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## Transcript

Numbers chapter 33. journeys over the 40 years of their wilderness wanderings. Israel would soon be entering into the land, and so it was a fitting occasion to look back upon the way that they had come.

In recounting their travels, they also needed to consider the lessons that they had learned upon the way, although the 40 years in the wilderness was in part a punishment for the people's refusal to enter the Promised Land on account of their unbelief. It was also an intensive period of training that Israel had to undergo before they could graduate to life in the land. As Moses told the people in Deuteronomy chapter 8 verses 2-5, And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness, that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

And He humbled you, and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothing did not wear out on you, and your foot did not swell these 40 years. Know

then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you.

Their travels are recounted as a series of stages. We are told where they began a particular leg of their journey, and where they come to the end of it. Each leg begins with the location with which the preceding leg ended.

Jacob Milgram and Gordon Wenham observe the similarity between the list of the stations on Israel's journey and accounts of Assyrian military campaigns. They suggest that Numbers chapter 3 fits a broader itinerary genre. There are 42 locations mentioned in the list, beginning with Ramses, from which they first set out, and ending at the plains of Moab near the Jordan, from which they would enter the Promised Land.

There are accounts of various stretches of Israel's journeys in the wilderness elsewhere in the Pentateuch, but this is by far the most comprehensive account. While there are some locations mentioned elsewhere that aren't mentioned here, it is in Numbers chapter 33 that we find the fullest list of locations. While there is extensive overlap, there are differences between the list of locations in Numbers chapter 33 and those mentioned elsewhere in the book, or in the book of Exodus, or in the various retrospective accounts of stages in Israel's wilderness journeys in the book of Deuteronomy.

In some cases, different names are used for the same place, Deuteronomy referring consistently to Sinai's Horeb, for instance. In other cases, several stations of Israel's journey are likely subsumed under a single regional designation, such as the wilderness of Paran, an explanation mentioned by Milgram. That there are 42 stations on the journey is interesting.

As Wenham notes, patristic commentators such as Ambrose and Jerome noted that there are the same number of generations in the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew chapter 1. 42 is a number that occurs in other symbolic contexts in scripture, not least in Revelation chapter 11 verse 2 and 13 verse 5. There it refers to the period of the beast's authority and the trampling of the holy city, 42 months. 42 months corresponds with 1260 days, and with a time, times, and half a time, which is three and a half years, a half week of years, a broken seven. We should also recognize the importance of possibly related numbers in the broader context.

For instance, the spoil of chapter 31 is divided into two halves of 420,000 items. Considering the importance that numbers and patterns have elsewhere in the book, it is reasonable to consider whether there are any patterns to be observed in the list of this chapter. Wenham speculates that there might be.

He suggests that we should subdivide the list of locations into six sets of seven, six weeks of locations as it were, and line them up against each other. When we do so, he believes that some symmetries might emerge. He notes, for instance, the resemblances

between the first and second cycles.

The first location in each is associated with a miracle, the death of the firstborn and the provision of manna and quail. The fourth is associated with military victories of the Egyptians and the Amalekites. The sixth is associated with abundant water and abundant food.

The seventh is associated with Miriam. He writes further, in the fourth, fifth and sixth cycles, the sixth station, Moserath, Moserah in Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 6, Mount Hall, mountains of Aburim before Nebo, Numbers chapter 33 verse 47, are the scenes of Aaron and Moses' death. Marah, the site of the first water miracle, and Kadesh, site of the last provision, are both fifth in their respective cycles, Exodus chapter 15 verse 25 and Numbers chapter 20 verse 11.

We might add to Wenham's list of parallels between the first and second lists. For instance, the presence of test of jealousy related events at Marah and in the wilderness of Sinai, both fifth in their sequence. We might even take such speculations further, pondering potential connections with the days of creation.

All of this said, on closer examination, several of Wenham's connections seem to be relatively weak, so while they may be suggestive, I have yet to be persuaded that they can be considered anything more than loose speculations. With such a detailed itinerary, we might initially think that the route taken by the Israelites through the wilderness would be easy to determine. However, this is definitely not the case.

Determining the location of sites mentioned in the scriptures is sometimes possible when they have been the sites of continual settlement, for instance, especially when there is some continuity in their place name. Sometimes we know topographical features of an area that might help us to narrow down the location of a site. Sometimes the name of a site itself might give clues to some of these features, suggesting the presence of a mountain, a tower, or a body of water.

In the case of Elim, we are told that there were 12 springs and 70 palms, for instance, which might help us to narrow things down somewhat. Yet, in the case of almost all of the sites mentioned within the list of Numbers chapter 33, we have no idea where they could be. This should not surprise us, as the wilderness wasn't a place of stable and settled habitation.

In others, most notably the location of the Red Sea Crossing and Mount Sinai, we have multiple competing candidates. These competing candidates can be assessed relative to various criteria and how well they fit various details of the text. The location of the Red Sea Crossing, for instance, needs to be suitable for the safe crossing of a vast multitude with children, animals, and carts, so needs to be relatively wide and flat.

It also needs to be suitable for the drowning of the Egyptians. It needs to be relatively near to the point of Israel's departure. Historically, this point of departure has generally been considered to be around the site of the Nile Delta in Egypt, with the crossing being situated either at the very northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, or somewhere along the present-day Suez Canal, which divides Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula.

We're not helped as much as we might think by the term Red Sea. In antiquity, the Red Sea could designate an extremely large body of water, including the modern Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. Both the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba, for instance, would be part of the Red Sea.

The Hebrew designation could also arguably be translated as Reed Sea. Many scholars, usually following such a translation, have located the Red Sea Crossing at the bitter lakes, Timsa Lake, or at one of the other shallow inland lakes between Egypt and Sinai. Some conservative Christians have resisted such interpretations on account of their supposed diminishing of the miraculous character of the Red Sea Crossing.

However, such theories might be perfectly consistent with the biblical record and the dramatic and decisive deliverance that they describe, even if they would make for a less cinematic scene. The considerations of plausibility that inform such readings need not be driven by doubts about God's existence or power. Besides the need for a suitable crossing location for children, animals, and the people's belongings, we should also consider the need for a large enough body of water to account for the fact that the locusts were all driven into the Red Sea in Exodus 10.

Given the number of the locusts, this might weaken the case for one of the inland lakes and strengthen the case for the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez. As Barry Beitzel notes, locating the crossing, especially if it was inland, is complicated by the extensive transformations of the region in the intervening period, most notably in the construction of the changing sea levels. Wenham, for instance, suggests the possibility that the bitter lakes were formerly connected to the Gulf of Suez.

Large canals may already have existed in the area in Moses' day, and some scholars argue that Pi-Ha-Hiroth could be translated as mouth of the canal. We must also consider that, although the Red Sea Crossing occurred between the fourth and the fifth locations, they camp by the Red Sea as the seventh location on their itinerary. Some, more recently, have argued that the crossing was of the Gulf of Aqaba between the Sinai Peninsula and modern Saudi Arabia, rather than in the Gulf of Suez.

Such a position is often driven by a belief that Mount Sinai is located in modern Arabia, rather than in the Sinai Peninsula. This position is informed by the belief that Mount Sinai was in the territory of Midian, and sometimes also by the Apostle Paul's reference to Mount Sinai being in Arabia. The latter detail can be accounted for by the broader territory that Arabia could designate in antiquity, one that includes the Sinai Peninsula.

While Moses shepherded flocks near Mount Sinai during his sojourn with Jethro and Midian, we are not told that Sinai was in Jethro's land. Indeed, when Jethro visited Moses at Sinai, he left to return to his own land. Shepherds and herdsmen could range over large regions, and it seems most likely to me that Sinai was near the west coast of the peninsula that later came to be named after it, a region in which it has traditionally been situated.

There are various criteria that candidates for Mount Sinai should meet. It needs to be a suitable location for the multitude of Israel to camp for a year, with vegetation for their flocks and herds. It needs to be on the typical route between Midian and Egypt, as it was a meeting place of Moses and Aaron in Exodus chapter 4 verse 27.

Locations near the south of the peninsula would be much less likely for this reason. Presuming that it was the site originally intended for Israel's worship when Moses requested that Pharaoh let the people go to make a three-day journey into the wilderness, it needed to be relatively near to the borders of Egypt. According to Deuteronomy chapter 1 verse 2, it's also an 11-day journey from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by way of Mount Seir.

These are among the considerations that lead me to favour a location in west-central Sinai. However, many people claim to be certain about radically contrary hypotheses on these questions. We should proceed with considerable caution.

Besides the location of the crossing and of Mount Sinai, scholars differ over the route taken by the itinerary more generally. The task of any trying to determine the route of the Exodus will be to find the route that is most coherent and which is the most likely fit in general, since we don't know the identity of almost all of the locations but have at most probabilistic cases for various locations for several of them. We can't easily join the dots as it were.

Rather, our identification of the dots of specific locations may often be informed by the likeliest line of the route which will be attracted to stronger clusters of candidates. Very few events or details are mentioned in the itinerary which perhaps serves to accent those events and details which are. Surprisingly, events such as the giving of the law and the sin with the golden calf are not mentioned, nor are several other key occurrences.

We are informed, as in Exodus 15.27, that there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees in Elim. The specificity of these numbers suggests that they might be important. We noted the importance of the numbers 12 and 70 in considering the quantity of the spoil in chapter 31 with 840,000 items, 70 times 12 times 1,000.

12 is the number of Israel's tribes, 70 is the number of Israel's elders in chapter 11. It is also associated with the number of the nations in chapter 10 of Genesis and with the number

of the bulls sacrificed over the Feast of Tabernacles. We are informed that there was no water for the people to drink at Rephidim, recalling the events of Exodus 17 at Masa Amereba where the people tested the Lord and Moses struck the rock.

This was a great symbol of the character of the wilderness period more generally, the people's testing of the Lord and the Lord's provision for them. The other location that is singled out is Mount Hor, which is presented as a turning point. Aaron dies there at the age of 123, 40 years after the departure from Egypt.

This is a sort of watershed moment, as the next thing we are told, the Canaanite king of Arad, learns of the coming of the people of Israel. The wilderness wanderings are about to conclude and the conquest of the land about to begin. The event recounted here is first mentioned in Numbers chapter 21 verses 1 to 3. When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Athurim, he fought against Israel and took some of them captive.

And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord and said, if you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction. And the Lord heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction. So the name of the place was called Hormah.

Why single out the death of Aaron? We might find something of an answer in a few chapters time, in chapter 35 verses 25 to 28. And the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he had fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood, for he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest.

But after the death of the high priest, the manslayer may return to the land of his possession. Israel, like the manslayer, is in a sort of exile until the Exodus generation dies out, with Aaron the high priest being chief among the representatives of that generation, the one who memorialized them before the Lord in the tabernacle, and the one who capitulated to them in their sin with the golden calf. When he dies, they will finally be free to enter.

The chapter concludes with instructions for their entry into the land. The Lord instructs Moses to direct the people to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan, and to remove all traces of their false worship, dividing the land among the tribes. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses charges the people concerning the entry into the land at great length.

There is a very solemn warning attached, however. If Israel fails to drive out the

inhabitants of the land and to uproot their false worship, they will be afflicted by them. The warning given here is similar to that which Joshua gives in Joshua chapter 23 verses 11 to 13 at the end of his ministry.

Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God, for if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you, and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from after this good ground that the Lord your God has given you. Tragically, this would come to pass, as the Lord declares in Judges chapter 2 verse 1 to 3. Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochem, and he said, I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land.

You shall break down their altars. But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.

Israel did not succeed in possessing all of the land, falling short of entering into its full inheritance on account of their unfaithfulness. They were afflicted by the people of the land, as they compromised with their idolatries. A question to consider.

Jacob Milgram comments upon the literary symmetry to be observed within verses 50 to 56. How do verses 55 and 56 invert verses 52 and 53? What might we learn by reading them in juxtaposition with each other?