

Notes on Numbers for Bible Love Podcast, June 3, 2021
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As a blessing to the listeners—and a reminder that you may know about Numbers than you realize: The LORD bless you and keep you;/ the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;/ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)

Name of the book is from LXX, based on census lists in chs 1 and 26—in MT, name is “In the Wilderness”

Picks up narrative from Exodus: in Exodus, the Hebrews travel from Egypt to Mt. Sinai; in Numbers, they travel from Sinai to Moab, where they are just across the Jordan River from the Promised Land, specifically from the city of Jericho. The book is easy to outline: 10 chapters at Sinai, 11 chapters in the wilderness, and the rest of the book on the plains of Moab.

Literarily, Exodus is almost entirely narrative, and Leviticus is almost entirely prescription; Numbers is roughly half and half (with prescription including lists, instruction, and legal material)

The most concise way I know to summarize Numbers is: Land, Law, and God

1. The plot of Numbers is driven forward by the journey to the Promised **Land**. This journey picks up where Exodus left off. Both the land and the people also harken back to Genesis and the covenant with Abraham: the two things God promises Abraham are a land and descendants to occupy it—the book of Numbers is about those descendants journeying toward that Land.
2. Exodus introduces God’s **Law** with the 10 Commandments; Leviticus explores and expands the Law, emphasizing that God’s people are to live a certain way. Numbers continue that emphasis and expansion, making clear that God continues to expect holiness from the people. From the people’s perspective, they must offer God their best selves, by (a) reverencing God and (b) living by God’s moral code.
3. As in every book of the Torah—and ultimately every book of the Bible—the central character and most important topic is **God**. In Numbers, the reader is struck by the contrast between the unfaithfulness of the people and the faithfulness of YHWH. The people fail to live up to the moral code; they murmur and complain against God repeatedly, displaying a consistent failure to trust God; they repeatedly rebel against God and God’s chosen leader, Moses. In spite of all that, however, God does not abandon the people. God continues to guide them (through the cloud and fire, as in Exodus); God continues to provide for them (with manna, quail, and water); and God continues to move them closer to the Promised Land and the fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham.

While God is the central character, the most important human character is *Moses*, God’s anointed leader and the conduit between God and the people. Not surprisingly, then, the most important place is the *tent of meeting*, where Moses brings the people’s concerns to God and receives God’s word for the people.

Important events in Numbers:

Observance of Passover at Mt. Sinai in ch. 9. Important because (1) the ritual and liturgical life of Israel is taking root; and (2) this Passover also helps with chronology: it has now been a year since the first Passover and leaving Egypt

Choosing of the 70 elders in ch 11 (precipitated by Moses' complaints to God); God "comes down" and puts part of Moses' spirit into the elders—this passage represents a necessary expansion of leadership and legitimates the authority of the elders.

The spying out of the Land in ch 12—a representative of each tribe goes into Canaan to scout the land (food and other resources), the people (especially how many are capable of fighting and what kind of arms they have), and the cities (are they walled and fortified?). 10 of the 12 are frightened, reporting that some of the people are like giants ("we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers"). Only Joshua and Caleb say that their trust in God should outweigh their fears, setting them up for future leadership. Meanwhile, this first generation is condemned to wander in the wilderness, where they will pass away; the second generation, led by Joshua and Caleb, will be the ones to go into the Promised Land.

Death of Miriam at Kadesh at the beginning of ch 20. She is the first woman in the Hebrew Bible named as a prophet; her song commemorates the greatest miracle in the history of Israel, the crossing of the Red Sea; and she is so influential that the book of Numbers has a story (in ch 12) dedicated to ensuring that Moses' authority is considered greater than hers (and Aaron's).

Water from a rock at Meribah in ch 20—displays the power of God and also becomes the basis for Moses and Aaron not entering the Promised Land (apparently because Moses struck the rock—twice—instead of simply speaking to it as God had instructed).

Death of Aaron on Mt. Hor at the end of ch 20—the priesthood and its vestments are transferred to his son, Eleazar.

The bronze serpent in ch 21—notable because it is referenced by Jesus in Jn 3:14-15.

The Balaam cycle in chs 22-24. The most well-known of these stories is Balaam's talking donkey, but even more significant to the narrative is that a Moabite prophet refuses to curse Israel and speaks only what YHWH says.

The first mention of Baal in the OT occurs in Num 25. Worship of Baal will become the most prominent form of idolatry in the Hebrew Bible. This story in Num 25 also begins the complex issue of marrying non-Israelites: when it is condemned, as here, these marriages are seen as opportunity for the Hebrews to commit idolatry (or at least syncretism). And yet Moses is married to both a Midianite and Cushite; David will have many non-Hebrew wives; and without a Moabite named Ruth, David would never have been born; and she is ancestor to both David and Jesus.

In ch 27, the five **daughters of Zelophehad** protest the practice of daughters being passed over in the inheritance of land. Moses “brings their case before YHWH.” Not only are they granted the land, but Moses establishes what we would call a precedent for future inheritances: in the absence of sons, daughters inherit; in the absence of any children, brothers inherit; in the absence of brothers, the nearest kinsman inherits. (Part 2 of the story takes place in ch 36: the women must marry within their own tribe to ensure that the wealth stays within the tribe.) The story is clearly important in terms of the role and rights of women; it also assumes the future stability of the Hebrews—viz., that they will thrive in the Promised Land— so they will need laws to govern generational wealth.

In ch 27, **Moses sees the Promised Land**, with a reminder of why he will not enter.

Also in ch 27, **Joshua is appointed as Moses’ successor**, before Eleazar and the people. Moses asks God to appoint his successor, so the people will not be “like sheep without a shepherd”; and, as with the 70 elders, “some of Moses’ spirit” is given to Joshua. The reader is now positioned for the final book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, which consists of three speeches by Moses before entering the Promised Land. Deuteronomy, then, concludes the Pentateuch and sets the theological framework for entry into the land and the rest of the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua – 2 Kings).

Interpretive helps for reading Numbers (because we are modern, western readers reading an ancient, Eastern document)

The Bible is a window into the development of Hebrews’ theology. Understanding this truth allows us to acknowledge the beliefs and actions of the early Hebrews without imitating them. For example, in Numbers 15, a man violates the sabbath regulation against work. After some deliberation, the man is stoned to death. This painful story tells how important the Law was—or was becoming: often overly harsh consequences reflect a culture in which leaders are trying to establish new norms. At any rate, it is psychologically plausible, maybe even psychologically necessary, for the people to interpret the execution as divine will. Especially given the storytelling conventions of the time, this comes out in the text as “God told Moses to tell the people to stone the man to death.” As modern Christians, we understand that this was a step in the development of Hebrew theology, but we would view a similar situation through the lens of Jesus’ teaching and example, and therefore we would respond very differently.

Important perspectives in Numbers:

1. Theology – God is (1) righteous and (2) sovereign; power and holiness are God’s main attributes (in Numbers and throughout the Hebrew Bible)
2. Anthropology – humans are finite and sinful (and, especially in Numbers, ungrateful and whiny)

3. Worldview (specifically causation) – in Numbers, the Hebrews have not yet developed any sense that there is an element of randomness in the world (contrast, e.g., Ecclesiastes and Job)

So, for example, some plague comes upon the people (sickness or poisonous snakes infest the camp). They don't believe in bad luck, so, like everything, it is attributed to God. Furthermore, their theology doesn't allow them to believe that God would do this without just cause, so they interpret the deaths as deserved punishment. Naturally, they want to avoid this catastrophe in the future, so they determine, to the best of their ability, the sin to be avoided, e.g., complaining against God or marrying people who do not worship YHWH. This type of explanation is psychologically plausible to them, perhaps even psychologically necessary.

Over time, however, the Hebrews do develop the notion of randomness, that consequences don't necessarily have simple, identifiable causes (again, see Ecclesiastes and Job). Then, in the NT, Jesus teaches that the main characteristic of God is love. These two changes dramatically impact our ability to interpret events (a) in our own lives and (b) in the oldest part of scriptures. (Aren't we fortunate to live on this side of Jesus!)