

The Book of Numbers

St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

The Book of Numbers and history

The Book of Numbers was written from a compilation of historical, legal, and liturgical traditions that spanned a thousand years of Israel's history (a time period centered around 721 B.C. and the destruction of Samaria). As a "history," though, Numbers was not written as are today's modern histories. One doesn't find exact details as to what happened to the Israel's tribes from the time they encamped at Mt. Sinai until they arrived in Canaan. The Israelites were not capable of writing this kind of history; and even if they were, such a documentary account would have been of little interest to them. What mattered to them was the account of God's active intervention in time and their redemption. Therefore history was important to the Israelites only because God acted in history, and was sure to act again. For the Israelites could never accept the view that their redemption and preservation were simply natural outcomes of human history; rather, they believed it was an undeserved gift of God. And despite Israel's frequent infidelity, God remained the center of their lives.

The Census of Israel

While a sense of optimism pervades the first section of Numbers, the earlier incident of the Golden Calf still needed to be addressed; for that terrible sin was a kind of "second Fall" after the Fall in the Garden of Eden. For example, before the Golden Calf incident every first-born male of the twelve tribes was eligible to minister as a Jewish priest. But *after* the Golden Calf incident, the eleven tribes which had broken the first commandment ("I am the Lord, your God. You shall no other gods besides me.") were, in effect, laicized; their firstborn sons could no longer serve as Jewish priests. Instead, God replaced them with men from the tribe of Levi, the men of which did not join in the revelry before the Golden Calf (Exodus 19:5-6). In the end, despite the covenant's later renewal, as a result of this grave sin there was from now on a certain *distance* between God and Israel.

Rebellions in the wilderness

As soon as the Israelites began their journey through the wilderness, a massive shift took place: not only was a sense of optimism lost but a spirit of "murmuring" or complaining pervaded the camp, just as it had in Exodus 15:22—17:7. The first rebellion resulted in a plague of fire (11:1-3). The second rebellion was when the Israelites complained about the *manna*, longing not only for the sumptuous fare of Egypt, but even despising God's gift of manna: "**there's nothing at all but this manna to look at**" (11:6). In exasperation Moses himself complains that he is unable to handle this unruly mob (11:10-15). So God responds by giving the people quail and "assistants" for Moses. However, since the people have kindled God's wrath, a plague breaks out among them (11:33-34). There was even dissent and jealousy within Moses' own family, when Miriam, the older sister of Moses, and Aaron, Moses' younger brother, both turned against him and challenged their brother's authority: "**Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses**" (12:2)?

The revolt of the spies

This is the central plot of the Book of Numbers. After Israel reached the area of the Kadesh, in the southern wilderness below the Promised Land, Moses chose twelve spies, one from each tribe, to scope out the land of Canaan before Israel took possession. Ten of the spies bring back a "majority report" that recommends a return to Egypt; for they report that it's hopeless to attack—the "people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large . . ." (13:28). However two other spies (Joshua and Caleb) present a "minority report" advocating an immediate attack. Still, the people believe the majority report and attempt to stone Moses and choose another leader to take them back to Egypt. What follows is a virtual recapitulation of

the Golden Calf incident, with God threatening punishment upon the people. However Moses again intercedes for Israel and God relents.

Because of this revolt, the Exodus generation is destined to die out before reaching the Promised Land of Canaan. Instead the next generation—their children—will succeed them. This passage, Numbers 14:26-34, is one of the most consequential turning point in the Hebrew Bible. For the Israelites who once prayed, “Would that we had died in this wilderness!” will see their prayer answered! They will die without ever entering the Promised Land. Nevertheless, God is merciful as well as just; and to their fear that their children—“our little ones will become a prey” and also in the wilderness, God declares they will not (14:31). Yet despite such reassurance, the very next day the first generation of rebels stubbornly attempted to invade Canaan despite the warning of Moses, and the result is disaster (14:41-45).

Laws for unintentional and intentional grave sins (Numbers 15)

By chapter fifteen the narrative of Numbers is interrupted by a series of laws. In these laws the Lord specifies and increases the requirements for sacrificial offerings. He distinguishes between two kinds of sins and their effects: inadvertent grave sins, which can be atoned for by means of sacrificial sin offerings, and deliberate grave sins, which cannot be atoned for and whose only punishment is being “cut off” from the people. To be “cut off” is to suffer the death penalty. For example, the man who was stoned to death for “gathering sticks on the Sabbath day” 15:32. The stoning of the Sabbath breaker is evidence that during this time deliberate violations of the Ten Commandments were literally *mortal* sins. Our Catholic faith teaches that mortal sin “destroys the divine life (sanctifying grace) in the soul of the sinner,” which can be forgiven through the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (CCC, p. 889).

What was the sin of Moses?

When the people complain about the lack of water, God commands Moses and Aaron to “tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water”(20:8). Instead, Moses disobeys and strikes the rock twice with his rod (20:11-12). The water indeed comes forth but God is not pleased with Moses and Aaron’s apparent lack of faith. This suggests they did not believe it was possible for their mere words to “tell” the rock to bring forth water. They must have thought it necessary to strike the rock as Moses had done earlier, shortly after the departure from Egypt (Exodus 17). In this way, the general rebelliousness and ingratitude of the people had finally become manifest even in Moses and Aaron. One might think that although Moses was technically disobedient, his actions did not seem grave enough to merit the punishment of being denied entrance into the Promised Land. But God’s judgment upon Moses is based less on the gravity of the exterior action than on the state of Moses’ heart, which is seen only by God.

The Bronze Serpent

When the Israelites complained about the lack of food and water, and the “worthless food” (*manna*) that God gave them, God punished them with venomous serpents (5:5). After Moses prayed to God for deliverance, God instructed him to make a bronze serpent and mount it on a pole. Whoever looked up at the serpent would be healed (21:5-9). However why use the figure of a snake? How could a snake be a source of blessing and healing? In truth, it was not the snake itself that brought about the cure. The healing of the people occurred when they looked up, in the direction of God, repented of their sin and reaffirmed their trust in God. It was one more demonstration that ultimately God is in control over Israel’s welfare and indeed everything in the natural world. Moreover the serpent on the pole was a reminder of their sin which brought about their suffering in the first place. Of course there is no connection between this serpent and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The bronze serpent was symbolic of the serpents God used to chastise the people for their unbelief. Note: since 1910, the American Medical Association has used the snake staff as the symbol for the healing art of medicine.

The apostasy atop Mount Beth-Peor

This is another recapitulation of the Golden Calf incident, only this time with the wilderness generation rather than with the Exodus generation. During the Exodus the Israelites did not pass through Moab, but through the “wilderness” to the east. Still, the Moabites were alarmed and their king, Balaak, the king of the Moabites, hired Balaam, a mercenary prophet, to curse Israel. King Balaak feared the huge number of Israelites on the move and at the very doorstep of his kingdom. Balaam took the king’s money but was unable to curse Israel because the Lord prevented him. Note: The Moabites were a tribe descended from Moab, the son of Lot (Genesis 19:37).

Not giving up, Balaam pressured the women of Midian (southern region below Moab) to seduce the men of Israel to sexual sin and to sacrifice to their gods. Balaam knew that if the Israelite men could be seduced into idolatry and its practices, then God Himself would curse them. Note: Midianites were descendants of Midian, one of the several stepsons of Abraham; and the land of Midian was also where Moses fled to escape Pharaoh’s wrath.

Perhaps not surprisingly the Israelite men, including members of the second-generation, succumbed to the temptation of the Midianite prostitutes and gave worship to the god, Baal Peor. The Baal of Peor was a local deity worshipped by the Moabites. This grave sin of Israel casts a shadow over the remainder of the Hebrew Bible, and at least partly explains the severity of some of Moses’ laws and exhortations in his farewell address. What the Golden Calf incident was to the Exodus generation, the worship of Baal of Peor was to the wilderness generation. And it was also here on the top of Mt. Pisgah in Moab that Moses looked upon the Promised Land but did not enter it.

Joshua succeeds Moses

Joshua was chosen to represent the tribe of Ephraim among the group of twelve tribal leaders who travelled to Canaan to scout out the land. Upon returning from their mission, ten spies frightened the people with tales of giants and “a land that consumes its inhabitants,” declaring it unconquerable. Again, Joshua and Caleb (from the tribe of Judah) dissented and tried to convince the Jews that God would indeed deliver the land to them. For his faith and courage, Moses publicly appointed Joshua his successor. Joshua would lead the Israelites and cross the River Jordan to the Promised Land. Joshua’s mission was to conquer land’s inhabitants and divide the land into portions for all the tribes.

