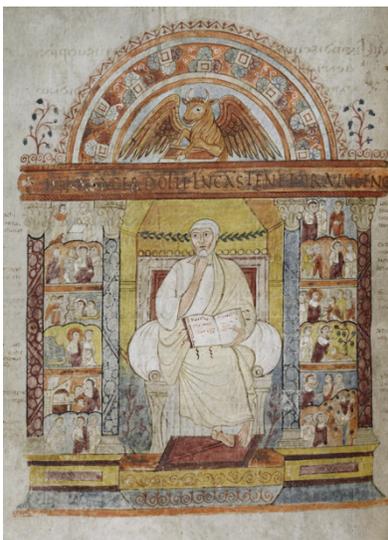


Numbers

by Kurtis Peters

This book contains an invitation to Christ followers today: to consider how Christ's word and Christ's presence may be reshaping us as kindred.

The book of Numbers is strange. It begins with the Israelites still at Mt. Sinai (elsewhere sometimes called Mt. Horeb – don't ask) and the reader is liable to think "Oh no, this is like more of Leviticus and the end of Exodus". Hopefully by this point, however, readers would have an appreciation for what Exodus and Leviticus were doing and communicating and so any sign of likeness to these books in Numbers would be exciting. But if that fails to appease those grumbling in the wilderness of the Pentateuch, then they will soon(ish) find out that Numbers is not the same. There is a fair number of lists and laws in the opening chapters (1-10), but after that the book returns to something closer to narrative. This is where Israel sets out from Sinai to head toward Canaan and the 40 years of wandering. Here we find famous stories such as manna in the wilderness, spies sent to explore Canaan, a few rebellions, a rock that gives water (but be careful how you treat that rock!), a bronze snake, and a talking ass. Mixed in among these stories are further stipulations for the community that feel rather disjointed from the narrative structure.



It is tempting to read Numbers (and much of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) as irrelevant today. If we are supposed to read the Bible simply as a list of things to do or not to do, then it would indeed be irrelevant. But it is important to develop a degree of empathy for the ancient peoples when we read their texts.

Empathy does not require us to agree with everything those people believed or did, but it may help us to see the value of such books as Numbers and the different threads found woven in it. Purity before a holy God was of great significance, and in a culture where ritual communicated obedience it is no wonder that we find a great deal of teaching about offerings, clothing, festivals, etc. Also, loyalty to one's family (or "kin" to appease Mark Glanville) was absolute. One communicates that attitude

about loyalty in comments on marital faithfulness (ch.5), but also on a much larger scale in stories of Israel's obedience or rebellion against Yahweh their God. Because Yahweh was considered the God of Israel (a kinship group) as opposed to the gods of other peoples, this loyalty too was a family loyalty. In order to make clear the weightiness of purity and loyalty, the punishments for deviance often seem quite severe. That is intentional. A severe

punishment demonstrates that those values are taken very seriously. Of course we may follow a different philosophy today, but perhaps some empathy with the ancients will help our understanding. Loyalty as a virtue is valued today as well, but not to the same degree as in ancient Israel. Purity before a holy being is quite foreign to us. Instead, in more “low-church” traditions like our own, we emphasize the nearness of a relatable God found in Jesus. Perhaps Numbers offers us room for expanding our picture of God.

Finally, a note on historicity. Did the Israelites really number more than 2 million people? Numbers 1:46 says that there were 603,550 men eligible for fighting in their army. If you include all women, and men who do not fit the age range, you end up with around 2 million. It is fairly clear that this number does not reflect reality. There are many ways that scholars have tried to understand what the text is doing here, but at least one can say that there is no way 2 million Israelites were wandering around in the Sinai wilderness. There is no way that Egypt could have controlled them before the exodus, or that the wilderness could have sustained them, or that Canaanites could have frightened them. Enough on that (unless you have questions!). Next, did the Israelites really destroy all those people, or did God really wipe out all those rebellious Israelites just because they were scared? Well, it’s hard to say. The stories here in Numbers and in much of the Old Testament were told for a purpose. They often served to explain Israel’s current situation at a given point in time as a result of some earlier events. So there is good reason to believe that much of Numbers is to be read as reflecting the *theological*

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reality/concern of a later period and therefore is fairly symbolic rather than historical. This does not make it untrue (be careful not to confuse a modern sense of historicity with truth!). Discovering what the symbolism actually means is the pursuit of careful interpretation.

However you find yourself reacting to Numbers, may you be encouraged in receiving the words of the priestly benediction *from Numbers 6:24-26!*

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.✠