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Theology of Numbers

Elmer A. Martens

Numbers is the fourth book in a collection of five books, the Pentateuch. It links with Genesis on the subject of promises (Clines) and curses. It follows Leviticus, and like it contains cultic regulations given at Sinai. Numbers is a narrative spanning forty years of Israel's journey from Sinai to Moab, the threshold of the Promised Land. It is a "bridge" book to Deuteronomy, which contains speeches by Moses given in the plains of Moab.

The theology of Numbers centers on God as caring and so fully involved with his people en route to their destination that even people's defections from him cannot thwart his promise to them.

LITERARY STRUCTURE

Structuring the book according to its geographical indicators yields three sections: encampment at Sinai (1:1–10:10), around Kadesh Barnea (10:11–20:13), and en route to the plains of Moab (20:14–36:13). The first section is occupied with directives from God about a military draft, camp organization, Levites, and cultic matters; the second two sections, while not without prescriptive material, are mainly reports of journey-related incidents. The journey is really a military campaign. Seen this way, the first section represents "preparation," the second, "execution" (Knierim). A temporally-oriented structure makes for a twofold division: the first census (old generation 1:1–25:16); the second census (new generation, 26:1–36:13) (Olson).

To inquire after the theology is to pay attention to the book's theological underpinnings and to ask what (theologically speaking) drives the

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book. Help toward a summary statement comes through identifying the genres of the book: instructions (first half) and report of Israel's journey (second half, cf. esp. 33:1-49). In both there is traced something of the dynamism between God and people; their relationship is not static. The final verse not only summarizes the book but provides a grid for a theological summary: "These are the commands and regulations the LORD gave through Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho" (36:13 NIV). A theology will deal with what is understood about Yahweh, about leaders, and about people in the context of commandments and a journey toward a Promised Land.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

God: Sovereign Guide and Lawgiver

The wilderness may be trackless, but the journeying people are not without a guide, namely, Yahweh. That Israel starts and stops on this journey as ordered by Yahweh is expressive of a fundamental understanding: Yahweh is suzerain over this people, God has taken charge. Nor is Yahweh remote, issuing directives at long distance. The ark is evidence of his presence (10:35-36; cf. 23:21; 35:34b), and so is the glory (*kābōd*) (9:15-23; cf. 16:19). Both are ever-ready reminders that God intersects with his people. The book is built on the dynamic of that interaction, with an emphasis on the constancy (*hesed*) of God. Lyrics capture the sense of Yahweh's involvement with his people; he is their indisputable and victorious leader: "Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel" (10:35-36 NIV). Is theology perhaps captured in poetry?

God: Gracious Provider and Chastiser

By providing the law God shows himself beneficent; Israel is not left without direction on matters, including camp organization, duties of Levites, and how to proceed when defilement occurs. God is not a capricious God, about whose expectations Israel needs to conjecture. God's will is made known; the desired pattern of behavior is plain. The journey notices especially underscore God's providential care. He provides leadership in the person of Moses, Aaron, and others (18:6). Materially, manna, quails, and water are wondrously made available (11:1-35; 20:2-13). God gives victory over hostile forces (21:3, 21-35; 31:1-12). The Aaronic benediction shows God ready to bless (empower, make productive), to favor his people with his presence, and to give them peace (6:22-27).

Incidents on the journey, however, depict a God who is not unconditionally benign. Yahweh's anger is aroused by the people's sinful behav-

ior: their complaint (11:1, 10, 13); the challenge to Moses' leadership (12:9); the disobedience at Kadesh (14:1-45; 32:10, 13); the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (16:22; cf. 16:46); and Balaam's testiness (22:22). Though not spelled out in Numbers, a governing understanding is that God is solicitous, loving, and committed toward his people, but he is at the same time committed to justice. He is not intolerant of evil. He cares for both people and justice. God's anger, then, is not the opposite of caring: his anger and caring are parts of the same coin—love.

A lyrical insertion captures both the attractive and foreboding aspects: "The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (14:18 NIV).

God: Embodiment of Holiness and Sin-forgiver

The laws especially assume that God desires purity, a purity other than simply hygienic, a purity "unconnected with social discrimination" (Douglas, 159). Numerous are the commands about defilement (5:1-4, 29; 6:12; 19:10-22). A cordon of Levites sees to it that disqualified persons do not encroach on the sanctuary (1:51; cf. 3:10; 16:40). But the directives that call for purity also make provision when people fail to be pure (15:22-29). Purification (sin) offerings are specified. "Sin offering" is an expression that occurs more than 30x (cf. chs. 7, 29). Incidents on the journey as at Meribah (20:2-13) and Kadesh (14:1-45) reinforce the demand for righteousness, which includes compliance to God's directives. In the journey accounts, forgiveness and reconciliation come in ways other than sacrifice: God's anger is assuaged through Moses' intercession (14:17-20), and punishment is halted through Phineas's act of righteous passion (25:6-11). Awe and fear of God are emotions evoked in Numbers.

God's People: United and Organized

The tribe, clan, and family structure is the basis not only for the taking of a census (1:2-47; 2:32-33) and for the selection of spies (13:1), but also for land distribution where even family concerns are noted (27:1-11; 36:1-13). The people are organized in their encampment with tribes placed around the center, the tabernacle (2:1-31), an arrangement that emphasizes the idea of one people under God, and also that all the tribes are heirs of the promise. When this unity is put to the test, as with the request of Gad and Reuben to settle in the Transjordan, Moses treats the event as a crisis. The solution is for the Transjordan tribes to participate in the conquest of the territory west of the Jordan (32:1-42).

God's People: Destined for Messianic Rule

Israel is a royal priesthood before God, as the blue tassels on the garments of the Israelites remind everyone (15:37-41). The people's destination and destiny is highlighted in the Balaam Cycle, the largest independent block of material in the book (chs. 22-24). Placed in the account shortly after the incident when the people spoke against the Lord and Moses, to which God responded by sending fiery serpents (21:4-9), the climactic series of blessings establishes that a people's sinfulness will not thwart God's plan. Instead, through a foreign diviner become prophet, the announcement (again in poetry) is made in Balaam's fourth oracle: "I see him but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob He will crush the foreheads of Moab A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city" (24:17, 19 NIV). The prophecy was fulfilled in David's kingship, and more fully and finally in Jesus the Messiah.

Israel's destiny is the land; en route she tangles with neighboring peoples. She is defeated at Kadesh Barnea by the Canaanites (14:44-45), although later she conquers them (21:1-3). Edom refuses her passage, though the request by Moses has been diplomatically and politely made (20:14-21), and so Israel follows another route. On the other hand, Israel mercilessly destroys people: King Sihon (21:21-32; note the poetry, vv. 27-30), Og of Bashan (21:33-35), and especially the Midianites (ch. 31) as response to their licentious seduction of Israel. Added rationale is given by the allusion to the now-lost book, *The Book of the Wars of Yahweh* (21:14). It is Yahweh who orders war and who fights for her (cf. 21:34).

God's People: Both Compliant and Noncompliant

The portrait of Israel is not without appeal. The princes of the tribes gave generously at the dedication of the offering (7:1-88). Israel did all the Lord commanded (1:54; 2:34; 5:4 9:5, 23; 10:13). And Moses also complied with God's directives (more than 15x: 1:17-19; 3:16, 42, 49-51; 4:37, 41, 45, 49; 7:6-8; 8:3-4, 20-22; 11:24-25; 17:7; 26:3-4; 27:22; 29:40; 31:3-24, 31)—a fact that makes his disobedience (20:9-13) all the more surprising.

The diary of Israel's journey tells mostly of a people bent on noncompliance and on wrongdoing. They are dissatisfied and complain about God's provisions (incident of the quails, 11:1-34); they lack trust and disobey; they refuse to enter the land (13:1-14:45); they are impatient (21:5-9) and insubordinate (Korah, 16:1-40); and they flagrantly disregard the commandments (e.g., they enter into illicit sexual relations with the Midianites).

anites, 25:1-5). Moses himself as leader fails to comply by striking the rock instead of speaking to it (20:1-13). Sin is clearly multidimensional.

There is clearly a nexus between sin and its consequences. Wrongdoing brings disastrous results—inevitably—to Miriam and Aaron (12:10), to Korah and company (16:15-34), and to the collective people of God (chs. 14-24; 25:5). The book is a warning (32:8-15, 23) as well as a challenge to the new generation.

Leaders: Mediating

Leaders and the ministry of leaders is a gift (18:5-7, 19). The necessity of leaders lies in part in their mediatorial role. Yahweh, who never speaks to the people directly, communicates his message through the leader Moses. Some 50x it is reported that “the LORD spoke to Moses.” Priestly leaders exercise their mediatorial role by offering sacrifices, e.g., Aaron’s pan of incense during a plague (16:46-50). The mediatorial service of leaders includes intercession (11:2; 12:13; 14:13-20; 16:22; 21:7). Behind the description of the mediatorial role lies the understanding of a significant distance between people and deity, but also of Yahweh’s desire for contact and involvement.

Leaders: Multiple and Caring

Leadership is multiple in nature even though Moses is *the* leader (31:13). Miriam and Aaron are part of an inner circle (12:1-5). By Yahweh’s command in response to Moses’ complaint of overload, seventy persons are chosen to assist Moses (11:16-29): marked persons, for upon them the Spirit comes in a significant way (16:17, 26-29). Provision is made for Aaron’s successor, Eleazar (20:22-29), and for Moses’ successor, Joshua (27:12-23). The installation of Joshua details not only the privileged position of leadership but through the shepherd image underscores the function of leadership as caregiving (27:12-23; cf. the ordination of Levites, 8:5-26).

Leaders: Privileged and Responsible

So many are the privileges of priests (cf. service in the tabernacle, 3:5-8; gifts to them of forty-eight cities, 35:1-15; receipt of people’s tithes, 18:8-32), that one may not be far wrong to think that the object of the book was to legitimate the priests, particularly the Levites. God insists, “The Levites are to be mine” (3:45; 8:14). The issue of status-succession/service was not unimportant (Ezek. 44:15-31). The two instances of revolt against the leader Moses (viz., Miriam/Aaron, Numbers 12:1-16; Korah, Dathan, Abiram, 16:1-40) leave one with an understanding

that God's appointed leaders are inviolate (cf. 17:1-12). One dare not move against them. But election is to responsibility more than to privilege. The legislation early in the book is at pains to specify clearly the duties of various groups (e.g., the Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites, 4:1-49). In general, the priests (sons of Aaron) present sacrifices (16:46; 25:13), officiate in purification (5:11-31; 19:1-10), and offer the priestly blessing (6:22-26). The Levites, not differentiated so sharply in other books, are here placed in a stratified position (lower than the priests) to be wardens of the tabernacle (1:47-54; 3:5-9; 31:30, 47). For a newly emancipated slave people, unaccustomed to self-governance, the structures of governance were critical.

Law: Not Impersonal Codes

The considerable number of directives, instructions, and laws touch more areas than merely cult or ethics; they encompass virtually all of life. There are directives about census (politics, 1:2-54; 26:2-63); about land distribution, boundaries, and inheritance (economics, ch. 34); about the faithless wife and women's vows (domestic matters, chs. 5, 30); about the disposal of war booty (military, ch. 31); and especially about cult (offerings, festivals, purification, chs. 7, 29; 18:9). These directives, all at the mouth of Yahweh, depict a dynamic of Yahweh/people interaction. The instructions (laws) are not a codified set of statutes, the makers of which are anonymous, but are instead the will of the suzerain, God. That these are not to be viewed as promulgations into a social vacuum is already clear from the way in which law (L) and narrative (N) alternate: 1-10:10 L; 10:11-14:45 N; 15 L; 16-17 N; 18-19 L; 20-25 N; 26-27:11 L; 27:12-23 N; 28-30 L; 31-33:49 N; 33:50-56; 34-36 L (so J. Milgrom, *Numbers*, xv).

Law: Precedent

A notable feature of the laws in Numbers is that they frequently arise out of an exceptional case or instance. So, for example, the incident of the persons unclean because of contact with a corpse yields the directive that for them the Passover can be deferred until they are clean (9:6-14). The unclarity of the nature of punishment for one who does not hallow the Sabbath, but gathers sticks contrary to command, is resolved: The man is to be stoned (15:32-36). The singular case of a man with only daughters who cannot inherit property is resolved by a decree that is in some ways a reversal of the earlier mandate (27:1-11; 36:1-13). Some fluidity exists in law. The understanding about law and individual circumstance is not unlike that formulated by Jesus: "The sabbath was made for humankind,

and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27 NRSV). D. T. Olson (183) may be going too far in claiming that the purpose of the book is to help new generations benefit from the experiences of previous generations and adapt the laws to meet new situations, but flexibility about "directives" there is.

Law: The Ten Commandments

While the Ten Commandments are not named or even mentioned, several incidents and even various laws assume these as basic. Idolatry (cf. second commandment) comes up briefly (25:2). One instance of breaking Sabbath rules occurs (15:32-36). The fifth commandment about respect for parents (authority figures) may account for the harsh action against Miriam/Aaron and Korah and company (12:1-16; 16:1-40). The law against adultery is background for the sexual involvement with the Midianites (25:1-18) and for the trial of the erring wife (5:11-31). Integrity ("You shall not bear false witness") is the issue in regulations about vows (30:1-16). Failure to observe the command against murder is the subject of 35:16-34. Balaam was susceptible to the temptation of coveting (chs. 22-24; cf. Jude 11 and the tenth commandment).

Land: Promise and Gift

The reason for the journey is the promise of land given to Abraham. The land is a gift (32:7, 9, 11); it is also a promise (11:12; 14:16). The Kadesh Barnea incident declares unambiguously that land is not to be grasped. Land must be received on Yahweh's terms or not at all. The grace-nature of this gift is clear upon realization that while the sin of Kadesh Barnea closed the door on that generation for the possession of land, the sequel states: "After you enter the land" (15:2). Similarly, the defection of people from God's ways at Peor (25:1-18) is not in itself sufficient reason to scuttle the promise; apportionment of land immediately follows (26:52). The second census is evidence that the verdict of punishment is sustained (26:64-65). And the promise of the land, too, will be kept. The word about land is the last word (chs. 34-36).

Land: Abundance

The land, as elsewhere, is described in attractive terms as the land flowing with milk and honey (14:8). Proof of this is the report of the spies and their exhibit of the land's fruit (13:26). Not only is the spy incident strategic in pointing up the people's negative spirit, but it offers a "taste" of the land's goodness and abundance.

Land: Ethics

Assumed as basic is the notion that certain behavior is appropriate in the land. The last several chapters (chs. 34–36) are mainly preoccupied with appropriate apportionments, personnel who will draw the boundaries, and the resolution of special cases, such as the wish of the Gadites and Reubenites (32:1–42) and the apprehensions of the kinship families of the Zelophehad women (27:1–14). Murder and bloodshed pollute the land (35:33–34). The lifestyle of a people has ecological consequences.

THEOLOGICAL SUMMARY

The two major genres, law and journey report (cf. 36:13), each speak to the question of a dynamic (changing) relationship between God and people. The laws (differing in this respect from Exodus and Leviticus) are subject to modification as a result of circumstances. Even laws are contingent. The itinerary, while straightforward (from Sinai to the land of Canaan), becomes tortuous, given Kadesh Barnea. So the way of the journey is also contingent. The portrait of this interaction, very much two-way in Numbers, differs markedly from Exodus, Leviticus, or Deuteronomy, where it is predominantly one-way (God to people).

So what is the theology of Numbers? The agenda is about cult and governance. Hence, the theology turns about purity, but also about authority and leadership—its legitimization through appointment and enablement, procedures for transfer of leadership, and designation of responsibilities. God is a God of order (cf. 1 Cor. 14:40). From the book's structure, attention is on God as lawgiver, guide, and promise-keeper, and on a people's defections from God. In short, the theology of Numbers centers on God as caring and so fully involved with his people en route to their destination that even people's defections from him cannot thwart his promise to them.

CANONICAL CONTEXT

In some ways Numbers with its laws anticipates Deuteronomy, and with its journey to the land, including military campaigns, anticipates the book of Joshua. Single themes in Numbers reappear elsewhere. Israel's poets incorporate the rebellion motif (Pss. 78:12–55 [note v. 52]; 106:13–33). The prophets have less to say about sacrifice than Numbers and more to say about repentance, a subject on which Numbers is virtually silent. The subject of Yahweh's holiness (marked in Leviticus) is echoed by Ezekiel, who also has much to say about "glory" and the presence of Yahweh (cf. 40–48). Wilderness themes, oppositely assessed, appear in the prophets (Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 20:10–26).

As for the New Testament, Christ is the “star” out of Jacob and the “scepter” out of Israel (Num. 24:17). Following the interpretation model of typology, Christ is said to embody in a fuller way that represented by the manna (John 6:22-59) and the water from the rock (John 4:1-15; 7:37-39), being himself the rock (1 Cor. 10:4). The lifting up of the Son of man is compared to the raising of a bronze snake (John 3:14; cf. Num. 21:4-9). On a more structural basis, W. Swartley (7, 44-94, 95-113) argues that Israel’s larger story, including the wilderness segment, is reflected in the structuring of the synoptic Gospels and in the journey motif there.

Like Israel, the church is a chosen people (1 Pet. 2:9). Leaders are to teach the word and be examples of holiness (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1:5-9); they are entitled to material rewards (1 Cor. 9:13-14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). Tithing is reiterated (Matt. 23:23; cf. Num. 18). Warnings to the Corinthians about wrong behavior are illustrated from Numbers (1 Cor. 10:1-11). The Kadesh Barnea incident is also the basis for a warning in Hebrews 3:17-19 (cf. Jude 5). Jude’s warnings about rejecting authority and about covetousness are each grounded in Numbers (Jude 11). 

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