

Numbers



Hartmann Schedel. "Balaam and the Angel," *Nuremberg Chronicle* (woodcut), 1493.
Anton Koberger, Nuremberg, Germany.

with
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Numbers

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Introduction

The title of the book in English comes through the Latin Vulgate (*Numeri*) from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (*Arithmoi*), titles that reflect the two censuses in chapters 1 and 26. The Hebrew title, however, better describes the book's contents: *Bemidbar*, "In the wilderness."

Recall that in Exodus God moves his people out of Egypt, reaffirms his covenant, and provides them with two great gifts: the Law and the Tabernacle. In Leviticus, he teaches his people how to apply the Law and use the Tabernacle. At this stage in our narrative, the Israelites are little more than a mob of ex-slaves camped in the Sinai. In Numbers, God organizes his people and he moves them out toward the Promised Land. In Exodus, the narrative spans one year; in Leviticus, one month; in Numbers, the narrative sprawls across thirty-nine years bringing the Israelites to the plains of Moab, poised to attack the fortified city of Jericho. During the thirty-nine years of Numbers, the entire generation that left Egypt (except Joshua and Caleb) dies in the wilderness and a new generation takes its place, a generation hardened by the rigors of the wilderness experience and by the disciplines that God imposes.

The narrative is carefully structured to reflect a three-part movement, to link the narrative to the larger story and to emphasize the failure of the first generation and the promise of the second. In Part 1 (chapters 1:1-9:23), we organize the people at Mt. Sinai, counting them by tribe, clan and family, and we prepare for the march to the Promised Land. In Part 2 (chapters 10:1-19:22), we move out, pushing our way toward the plains of Moab, along the way encountering one failure after another. In Part 3 (chapters 20:1-36:13), the new generation arrives at the plains of Moab, poised for battle. Embedded within this three-part structure are two travel sections: the first from Sinai to Kadesh-barnea (10:11-12:13) and the second from Kadesh-barnea to the plains of Moab (20:1-21-35), thus linking the narrative geographically to Exodus 20-Leviticus 27 on the front side and Deuteronomy 1-Joshua 6 on the back. The central section of the three-part structure focuses on the peoples' rebellion and failure: their complaints, their disappointment in Moses' leadership, and their lack of trust in God.

In Exodus God had told his people, "if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Exodus 19: 5-6), and in

Leviticus he said, “Since I, the Lord, am the one who brought you up from the land of Egypt that I might be your God, you shall be holy, because I am holy” (Leviticus 11: 45). Throughout Scripture, God implores his people to be holy, to be set apart. But it is one thing for God to say so; it is another for the Israelites to be so. In Exodus and Leviticus God provides the Law—a set of principles by which a holy people is to live with God and one another; the Tabernacle—a structure that enables a sinful people to gain access to an infinitely holy God; and the presence of God himself, in the form of the pillar of cloud and fire. By the end of Exodus and Leviticus the Israelites have everything they need to *be* a holy people. In Numbers, God organizes his people into a functioning community, enabling them to appropriate what he has provided.

As God formed order out of chaos in Genesis 1-2, so in Part 1 of Numbers, chapters 1-9, he forms order out of chaos in the covenant community. In chapter 1 God commands every Israelite male between the ages of twenty to fifty, those who can fight, to be counted by tribe, clan and family, and he commands Moses to enlist a leader from each tribe to ensure that the work is done properly. In chapter 2 God organizes the people, again by tribe, clan and family, around the Tabernacle, with his presence in the form of the pillar of cloud and fire, at the center. After the census and the positioning, 603,550 men of fighting age are encamped, each under his own banner, precisely where God tells him to be.

In chapter 3 the Levites are counted in the same fashion, and in chapter 4 each Levite clan receives its duties regarding the Tabernacle. By the end of chapter 4 each Levite knows who he is, where he belongs and what he is supposed to do—all in reference to God.

Once the community is organized, God then issues orders to ensure a holy life within the camp. In chapter 5 he forbids anyone “unclean” from participating in communal life; he ensures that wrongs are righted among community members—including matters of jealousy among husbands and wives; he provides opportunity for men and women to set themselves apart to God through a temporary Nazirite vow; and he prescribes a priestly blessing to be given to the people by Aaron the high priest.

In this holy community life revolves around God and the Tabernacle. In chapter 7 Moses consecrates the Tabernacle and each tribe brings gifts for its consecration; in chapter 8 its lamps are set up and the Levites are set apart for service to it and to God. Finally, in chapter 9 the people are reminded to celebrate the Passover each year, remembering all that God has done for them.

When everything is ordered and finished, God enters his Tabernacle in cloud and fire, taking up his position at the center of the community. At this point, the people are oriented toward God and they are prepared to live a life “holy unto the Lord.”

In Part 2 reality sets in. No sooner do the people begin their march toward the Promised Land than they begin complaining about their hardships and about the food: “Now the people complained bitterly in the hearing of the Lord . . . The rirraff among

them were so greedy for meat that even the Israelites lamented again, ‘If only we had meat for food! We remember the fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now we are famished; we have nothing to look forward to but this manna’” (11: 1; 4-6). With each complaint and act of disobedience, God metes out punishment: when the people complain about food, he gives them meat, “not for one day, or two days, or five, or ten, or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your very nostrils and becomes loathsome to you [!]” (11: 19-20). When Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses, asking “Is it through Moses alone that the Lord has spoken?” (12: 2), God inflicts leprosy on Miriam. And when the spies come back from exploring the land and file a negative report, God threatens to destroy the entire people, finally relenting and destroying only the Exodus generation—603,448 people, sparing only the faithful Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who file a positive minority report. In Part 2 of Numbers we see a people radically *disoriented* toward God and toward their calling to be a holy people.

As we enter Part 3, disorientation diminishes as the first generation dies off and a new generation replaces it. With the victories over Sihon, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan—and with the remarkable story of Balaam’s inability to curse the Israelites—the promise of *reorientation* toward God emerges. Although clouded by ongoing acts of disobedience, the taking of a new census in chapter 26 reaffirms God’s presence among his people: he has not abandoned them; he has not forsaken them.

This new generation presents a new opportunity. A new generation forged in the hardships and disciplines of the wilderness offers a new hope of holiness. With the new census comes new commands for living life in the Promised Land, commands regarding life lived in obedience, life lived as a people set apart to God. As the narrative unfolds, we see more than a glimmer of hope that life might be as God would have it.

Yet, dark shadows flicker over the hope: even as the new generation is counted, the tribes of Ruben, Gad and half of Manasseh bargain for land on the east of the Jordan River, land not given to them by God, but land that they desire nonetheless. With the bargaining comes promises made but never intended to be kept:

*Moses said to them in reply: ‘If you do this—if you march as troops before the Lord into battle and cross the Jordan **in full force** before the Lord until has driven his enemies out of his way and the land is subdued before the Lord, then you may return here, free from every obligation to the Lord and to Israel, and this land will be your possession before the Lord. But if you do not do this, you will have sinned against the Lord, and you can be sure that the consequences of your sin will overtake you. Build the towns, then, for your families, and the folds for your flocks, but fulfill what you have promised.’*

The Gadites and Reubenites answered Moses, ‘Your servants will do as my lord commands. While our wives and children, our livestock and other

animals remain here in the towns of Gilead, all your servants will go across as armed troops before the Lord to battle, just as my lord says.’’
(Numbers 32: 20-27)

In the second census the men of the tribes of Ruben, Gad and half of Manasseh number 110,580. When the time comes to cross the Jordan for combat, we read that “the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh, armed, marched in the vanguard of the Israelites, as Moses had ordered. About forty thousand troops [of 110,580] equipped for battle, crossed over before the Lord to the plains of Jericho for war” (Joshua 4:12-13).

And so the compromise begins.

Biblical narrative is textured and multilayered, a dense fabric woven together through the warp and the woof of history and geography. Numbers is just such a work. No simple narrative, it draws its meaning not only from itself, but from the text that surrounds it. Take, for example, the hilarious story of Balaam and his talking ass.

When the Israelites arrive on the plains of Moab, their reputation precedes them. In Joshua, it is Rahab the harlot who says to the Israelite spies, “[W]e have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan, whom you destroyed under the ban. We heard, and our hearts melted within us; everyone is utterly dispirited because of you, since the Lord, your God, is God in heaven above and on earth below” (Joshua 2:10-11). It is little wonder then that “Moab said to the elders of Midian, ‘Now this horde will devour everything around us as an ox devours the grass of the field’” (Numbers 22: 4). Like a rabbit frozen in the headlights of an oncoming car, Moab stands paralyzed in the face of God’s people, over half a million strong, staging for war on the plain next door. Only supernatural help will suffice.

At that time Balak, son of Zippor, was king of Moab; and he sent messengers to Balaam, son of Beor, at Pethor on the river, in the land of the Ammonites, to summon him with these words, “A people has come out of Egypt! They have covered up the earth and are settling down opposite me! Now come, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I am. Perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed.”

(Numbers 22: 4-6)

The story that follows is both extraordinarily funny and deadly serious.

Clearly, Balaam is a seer of no ordinary ability. Brought all the way from Pethor, a town located on the west bank of the Euphrates River about twelve miles from Carchemish, his fame must have preceded him, as Israel’s preceded it. To attract

Balaam, the elders of Moab and Midian offer him a hefty sum, given his prodigious reputation.

Any pagan seer was accustomed to consulting a variety of gods on any number of matters. Learning that he was to curse the Israelites, Balaam wisely decides to consult the Israelite god before accepting the job. And God accommodates him. After telling the Moabite/Midianite delegation to “stay here overnight, and I will give you whatever answer the Lord gives me” (22: 8), Balaam receives God’s message forbidding him to curse the Israelites.

God’s reply provides both a problem and an opportunity. Balaam delivers the message to the delegation as God has given it, and they are obviously disappointed, but in delivering the message Balaam sees the opportunity to negotiate a higher fee: after all, he has spoken to the Israelite god, and the god has spoken to him, so he has clearly made contact—the first step in any negotiation. And his strategy works. The first delegation returns home, and Balak sends other princes “who were more numerous and more distinguished than the others” (22: 15). They say, “Thus says Balak, son of Zippor: Please do not refuse to come to me. I will reward you very handsomely and will do anything you ask of me. Come, lay a curse on this people for me” (22:16-17). The offer of an increased fee is on the table. No amateur in such matters, Balaam replies, “Even if Balak gave me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything small or great, contrary to the command of the Lord, my God” (22:18-19). Balaam clearly has the reputation as a mighty seer; he has made contact with the Israelite god; and he now claims an intimate relationship with him, referring to him as “the Lord, *my* God.” It may take Balak’s “house full of silver and gold,” but the mighty seer just may convince this god to allow him to curse the Israelites. And that night the Lord seemingly relents, encouraging Balaam’s line of thinking: rather than forbidding Balaam to go any further with the game, the Lord says, “If these men have come to summon you, go back with them; yet only on the condition that you do exactly as I tell you” (22: 20). Could it be that God will sell the Israelites out—if only the fee is high enough? Surely, Balaam must think so.

Early the next morning Balaam gets up, saddles his ass and goes with the princes of Moab. Balaam’s plan is progressing nicely. The fee for divination has increased and Balaam has opened the door to increasing it further, while God has seemingly opened the door to allowing Balaam to curse the Israelites and to collect his fee. “But,” we read “now God’s anger flared up at him for going, and the angel of the Lord took up a position on the road as his adversary” (22: 22). Certainly, God is not angry because Balaam went with the delegation, for God allowed him to go; more likely he is angry because of Balaam’s impudence, thinking that he can manipulate God into cursing the Israelites—if only the fee is high enough. If this is the case, Balaam would indeed be the great seer he imagines, rather than the blind ass he truly is.

Along the road God opens Balaam’s eyes. In a hilarious scene, Balaam’s ass encounters the angel of the Lord three times: the first time, she simply turns aside, and Balaam beats her; the second, she pushes close to a wall, crushing Balaam’s foot, and he

beats her again; and the third, she lays down under Balaam, and he beats her with his staff. Each time Balaam's ass sees the angel of the Lord, while Balaam doesn't, tempting us to ask: "Just who is the ass in this story?" Then, in a stroke of divine inspiration, God opens the ass's mouth and she says, "What have I done to you that you beat me these three times?" Rather than stand back, astonished at a talking ass, Balaam erupts in anger: "You have acted so willfully against me . . . that if I only had a sword in my hand, I would kill you here and now." The comedy is only heightened as the ass calmly replies: "Am I not your [ass], on which you have always ridden until now? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way before?" "No," he replies sullenly, as it dawns on him what he is doing—holding a conversation with an ass (22: 28-30)! Only Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* has a scene of comparable humor when Titania, the faerie queen, falls in love with Bottom, a comic figure who has been transformed into a man with an ass's head. This is an uproariously funny moment in Scripture!

With Balaam put firmly in his place, he arrives at Kinath Huzoth, where he gets his first glimpse of Israel spread out before him. No longer does Balaam operate under the illusion of manipulating God; rather, he commands Balak to build seven altars and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for sacrifice. Perhaps in doing so, God will deign to meet with him and give him a message. And God does: three times, and each time Balaam pronounces a blessing on Israel, rather than a curse. Obviously, this is not what Balak wants. Furious at Balaam's failure, "in a blaze of anger at Balaam, Balak clapped his hands and said to him, 'It was to lay a curse on my foes that I summoned you here; yet three times now you have actually blessed them! Now flee to your home. I promised to reward you richly, but the Lord has withheld the reward from you'" (24: 10-11). Balak's words and his scathingly ironic tone trigger Balaam's final oracle, blessing Israel—and cursing Balak! "Then," we read, "Balaam set out on his journey home; and Balak also went his way" (24: 25).

Thus the story ends—or does it?

In Numbers 25, the very next chapter, we read: "While Israel was living at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by prostituting themselves [literally, *to whore with*] the Moabite women. These then invited the people to the sacrifices to their god, and the people ate of the sacrifices and bowed to their god. Israel thereby attached itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord's anger flared up against Israel" (25:1-3). Positioning this story immediately after the Balaam story should raise the question in any reader's mind: "Why did the Israelite men do this?" In the first commandment, God specifically forbade such behavior: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods beside me" (Exodus 20:2-3). And only a few verses earlier Moab was about to go to war with Israel.

What's happened here? Perhaps Balaam did not return home after all. Perhaps, unwilling to give up his "fee for divination," Balaam returned to Balak with an alternate plan. Perhaps it was Balaam's idea to have the Moabite women seduce the Israelite men and subdue them through sexual favors. Such a reading may seem farfetched, but when

we turn to Numbers 31 we encounter strong evidence that this is precisely what happened. In Numbers 31 we read:

The Lord said to Moses: “Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites, and then you will be gathered to your people.”

So, Moses told the people, “Arm some men among you for the campaign, to attack Midian and to execute the Lord’s vengeance on Midian. From each of the tribes of Israel you will send a thousand men to the campaign. From the contingents of Israel, therefore, a thousand men of each tribe were levied, so that there were twelve thousand men armed for war . . .

*They waged war against the Midianites, as the Lord had commanded Moses, and killed every male. Besides those slain in battle, they killed the kings of Midian: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur and Reba, the five kings of Midian; **and they also killed Balaam, son of Beor, with the sword.***

(Numbers 31:1-4; 7-8)

And when the Israelites fail to kill the captive Midianite women, Moses thunders: “‘So you have spared all the women!’ he exclaimed. ‘These are the very ones who on Balaam’s advice and were behind the Israelites’ unfaithfulness to the Lord in the affair at Peor, so that plague struck the Lord’s community. Now kill, therefore, every male among the children and kill every woman who has had sexual relations with a man. But you may spare for yourselves all the girls who have not had sexual relations’” (Numbers 31:15-18).

Assimilation into the surrounding cultures and the worship of their gods posed a constant danger for the Israelites. Before they cross into the Promised Land, Moses warns them about this:

When the Lord, your God, cuts down from before you the nations you are going in to dispossess, and you have dispossessed them and are settled in their land, be careful that you not be trapped into following them after they have been destroyed before you. Do not inquire regarding their gods, “How did these nations serve their gods, so I might do the same.” You shall not worship the Lord, your God, that way, because they offered to their gods every abomination that the Lord detests, even burning their sons and daughters to their gods.’”

(Deuteronomy 12: 29-31)

And sure enough, this is what happens. No sooner do the Israelites conquer the Promised Land than we read in Judges: “So the Israelites settled among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage, and gave their own daughters to their sons in marriage, and served their gods” (Judges 3:5-6). Even Solomon falls prey to such behavior, for we read that toward the end of his life, “Solomon then built a high place to Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and to Molech,

the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain opposite Jerusalem [the Mount of Olives]. He did the same for all his foreign wives who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods” (1 Kings 11:7). It is for this reason that God strips the kingdom from Solomon and gives it to Jereboam (cf. 1 Kings 11:9-40).

Finally, in the New Testament we find Peter comparing the avaricious motives of false teachers to “the road of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the payment for wrongdoing” (1 Peter 2:15), and Jude calls down woe on false teachers who “have abandoned themselves to Balaam’s error for the sake of gain” (Jude 11). The final allusion to Balaam occurs in Revelation, where the Lord castigates the church in Pergamum for having “people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who instructed Balak to put a stumbling block before them: to eat food sacrificed to idols and to play the harlot. Likewise, you also have some people who hold to the teaching of [the] Nicolaitians” (Revelation 2:14-15). The Nicolaitians were those who taught accommodation to the pagan world, a particular danger at Pergamum with its stunning acropolis, its gorgeous Greek and Roman temples and its magnificent altar of Zeus.

In Scripture, Balaam becomes an emblem of corrupt teaching for gain, teaching that undermines the word of God by suggesting accommodation to the dominant pagan culture. The full meaning of the Balaam story only emerges when we read it in the context of our entire biblical narrative.

Numbers Outline

I. At Mt. Sinai (1:1-9:23)

- A. The First Census (1:1-3:51)
 - i. Counting the people (1:1-54)
 - ii. Arranging the tribes (2:1-34)
 - iii. Counting the Levites (3:1-39)
 - 1. Collecting the redemption price (3:40-51)
- B. Duties of the Levites (4:1-49)
 - i. The Kohathites (4:1-20)
 - ii. The Gershonites (4:21-28)
 - iii. The Merarites (4:29-33)
 - iv. Counting the workers (4:34-49)
- C. Duties of the People (5:1-6:27)
 - i. Keeping the camp pure (5:1-4)
 - ii. Making restitution for wrongs (5:5-10)
 - iii. Testing a jealous husband/unfaithful wife (5:11-31)
 - iv. Making a Nazirite vow (6:1-21)
 - 1. The priestly blessing (6:22-27)
- D. Setting Up the Tabernacle (7:1-9:23)
 - i. Bringing gifts for the dedication (7:1-89)
 - ii. Setting up the lamps (8:1-4)
 - iii. Setting apart the Levites (8:5-26)
 - iv. Remembering the Passover (9:1-14)
 - v. The pillar of cloud and fire (9:15-23)

II. On the Move (10:1-19:22)

- A. Preparing the Leave Mt. Sinai: Making the Silver Trumpets (10:1-10)
- B. The March Begins (10:11-36)
- C. Trouble and Conflict Abound (11:1-19:22)
 - i. The people complain about food (11:1-35)
 - 1. God sends quail (11:4-35)
 - ii. Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses (12:1-16)
 - 1. God chastises Miriam (12:4-16)
 - iii. Moses sends spies into the land (13:1-14:45)
 - 1. God punishes the people for their lack of faith (14:10-45)
 - 2. God reassures his people (15:1-41)
 - a. Offerings to be made in the land (15:1-21)

- 1) Equal justice in the land (15:15-16)
 - b. Offerings for unintentional sins (15:22-31)
 - c. Intentional sin punished (15:32-36)
 - d. Tassels for remembrance (15:37-41)
 - iv. The Priests rebel (16:1-18:32)
 - 1. God punishes Korah and his followers (16:16-50)
 - 2. God reaffirms Aaron's authority (17:1-13)
 - 3. God reiterates the priests' responsibilities (18:1-7)
 - 4. God reaffirms the priests' privileges (18:8-32)
 - v. God institutes an offering for purity: the red heifer (19:1-22)

III. On the Plains of Moab (20:1-36:13)

- A. The Move to Moab (20:1-22:1)
 - i. Water shortage (20:2-13)
 - 1. The death of Miriam (20:1)
 - 2. God provides water from the rock (20:9-13)
 - a. Moses' sin (20:11-12)
 - ii. Repulsed at Edom (20:14-29)
 - 1. The death of Aaron (20:22-29)
 - iii. Victory at Arad (21:1-3)
 - iv. Moving around Edom (21:4-35)
 - 1. The people complain (21:4-9)
 - a. God sends venomous snakes (21:6-7)
 - b. God provides a serpent of brass for healing (21:8-9)
 - 2. The journey continues (21:10-35)
 - a. Victory over Sihon, king of the Amorites (21:21-31)
 - b. Victory over Og, king of Bashan (21:32-35)
 - v. Arriving on the plains of Moab (22:1)
- B. Moabite Opposition (22:2-25:18)
 - i. Plan A: Balaam and his talking ass (22:2-24:25)
 - ii. Plan B: Seducing the men of Israel (25:1-18)
- C. Preparing for Conquest (26:1-36:13)
 - i. The second census (26:1-65)
 - ii. The issue of Zelophehad's daughters (27:1-11)
 - iii. New leadership: Joshua to succeed Moses (27:12-23)
 - iv. Remembering religious obligations (28:1-30:16)
 - 1. Daily offerings (28:1-8)
 - 2. Sabbath offerings (28:9-10)
 - 3. Monthly offerings (28:11-15)
 - 4. Passover offerings (28:16-25)
 - 5. Feast of Weeks offerings (28:26-31)
 - 6. Feast of Trumpets offerings (29:1-6)
 - 7. Day of Atonement offerings (29:7-11)

- 8. Feast of Tabernacles offerings (29:12-40)
- 9. Special vows (30:1-16)
- v. Taking vengeance on the Midianites (31:1-54)
- vi. Cutting a deal with God: Ruben, Gad and half of Manasseh bargain for land east of the Jordan (32:1-42)
- vii. Forty stops in the wilderness: a review (33:1-56)
- viii. The Promised Land (34:1-35:34)
 - 1. Tribal boundaries (34:1-29)
 - 2. Towns for the Levites (35:1-5)
 - 3. Cities of refuge (35:6-34)
- ix. Zelophehad's daughters, revisited (36:1-13)

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Numbers

Syllabus

Week 1 (September 28, 29)

Lesson #1: An Introduction to Numbers

We began our study of the Bible by defining four foundational principles for reading and understanding our text: 1) the Bible is rooted in geography; 2) the Bible emerges from history; 3) the Bible—in its final, finished form—is a unified literary work; and 4) the Bible is the word of God. The third principle recognizes that although written over a period of 1,500 years by many different authors, with each book of the Bible passing through the hands of editors and redactors, and each book of the Bible having its own more or less complex textual history, the Bible—*as we have experienced it for the past 2,000 years in western culture*—is a unified literary work.

The 72 books of Scripture are unified structurally in their *shape*: the curtain rises in Genesis and it falls in Revelation; the main character is God; the conflict is sin; and the theme is redemption.

Scripture progresses in a *linear* fashion from Genesis through Revelation: Genesis begins “in the beginning” and it moves through time in a straight line, with periodic recapitulation: Genesis→ Exodus→ Leviticus→ Numbers→ Deuteronomy→ Joshua→ Judges ← Ruth, (recapitulation into “the days when the judges ruled”)→ I Samuel→ 2 Samuel . . .

Recurring images create a tight network of *thematic and textual cohesion*: water, fire, oil, blood, recurring sets of numbers (3, 7, 12, 40), and so on.

The book of Numbers fits neatly into this architectural structure:

- In Genesis, God creates all that is, and it is very good; sin enters the world, and a rapid fall from grace begins, with catastrophic results; around 2000 B.C. God introduces the plan of redemption, forging a covenant with Abraham and Sarah; Abraham and Sarah have Isaac; Isaac and Rebekah have Jacob; Jacob and his wives have twelve sons, who become the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel; and by the end of Genesis, Jacob and his family have relocated to Egypt, where Joseph, son #11, has become the “prime minister,” second only to Pharaoh.
- Between Genesis and Exodus 400 years flash by, and the Israelites have grown from an extended family of 72 people to an incipient nation of two million—and

they have become slaves. God then raises up Moses, who leads the people out of Egypt in 1446 B.C. (according to our dating scheme). Once at Mount Sinai, God reaffirms his covenant with the Israelites, giving them two great gifts: 1) the Law and 2) the Tabernacle. At the end of Exodus, the Israelites have been out of Egypt for twelve months: it is 1445 B.C.

- In Leviticus, God speaks to Moses and the Israelites from within the Tabernacle, instructing them in how to apply the Law and how to use the Tabernacle. God's instruction in Leviticus spans one month.
- In Numbers, the Israelites have been out of Egypt for 13 months, and God organizes his people, having them counted by tribe, clan and family, and positioning them in an orderly fashion around the Tabernacle, with the pillar of cloud and fire above the holy of holies. Once organized, the Israelites move out, marching from Mt. Sinai to the plains of Jericho on the east side of the Jordan River. The march does not go smoothly, however, and it takes 39 years to reach their destination. When the Israelites finally camp on the plains of Jericho, it is 1406 B.C.; the entire generation that left Egypt has died in the wilderness; and a new generation, hardened by the wilderness experience, has replaced them.

Numbers is a thrilling book that tells the tale of a rebellious people, digging in their heels, “kicking against the goad,” as it were; a covenant people disobedient to their God, who despite it all, remains faithful to them; a tale of adventure, of cowardice and heroism, of tragedy and triumph—a tale of humanity at its best . . . and at its worst.

Lesson #2: “Count ‘em Up”—the 1st Census (Numbers 1: 1 - 3: 51)

The Israelites left Egypt in 1446 B.C. a frightened, undisciplined mob of ex-slaves. As we enter Numbers we organize the mob, counting them by tribe, clan and family, and organizing the 603,550 men and their families around the tabernacle in an orderly fashion, with the pillar of cloud and fire hovering above the holy of holies, watching them, preparing to lead them to the Promised Land of Canaan.

What might seem like a tedious exercise in census-taking produces extraordinary results: by the time the counting is complete, every Israelite knows who he is, where he belongs, and what he's supposed to do—all relative to God.

Would that we might be so fortunate!

Assignment

Read: Numbers 1: 1 – 3: 51.

Enrichment Material

“Reading Guide, Numbers,” *The Catholic Study Bible*, pp. 133-141.

Lawrence Boadt, “Numbers,” *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 150-163.

Week 2 (October 5, 6)

Lesson #3: *Preparing the People for the March (Numbers 4: 1 – 6: 27)*

The journey to the Promised Land will be arduous, and preparation for the march is essential. The journey covers roughly 245 miles, about 2-3 months of travel time on foot for a large group of men, women, children and the elderly; it takes the Israelites 39 years! Clearly, they will meet trouble and difficulties along the way: fires, earthquakes, enemy attacks, internal dissension, rebellion, just to name some of the most obvious.

Preparation and a strict set of rules are essential if the Israelites are to survive their wilderness trek through treacherous physical, spiritual and psychological terrain.

Lesson #4: *Preparing the Leaders for the March (Numbers 7: 1 – 9: 23)*

Leading two million people—men, women, children and the elderly—on a 245-mile trek through the wilderness is much like herding cats, with the addition of difficult terrain, poisonous snakes, blazing heat, lack of food, water shortages, and very vocal opposition from within the group. As we learned in our study of Leviticus, the Levites are the intermediaries between God and the people, and they must be properly prepared—physically, spiritually and emotionally—for the task. Lesson #4 addresses the Levite’s preparation.

Assignment

Read: Numbers 4: 1 – 9: 23.

Week 3 (October 12, 13)

Lesson #5: *“Move ‘em Out”—the March Begins (Numbers 10: 1 – 14: 45)*

“In the second year, on the twentieth day of the second month, the cloud rose from the tabernacle of the covenant, and the Israelites moved on from the wilderness of Sinai by stages . . . (10: 11).”

And so the march begins.

And the complaining! Moses had counted on Hobab, his Midianite relative who knows the wilderness terrain intimately, to lead the march, but Hobab refuses and returns home. Within days, the people hate the bland, tasteless manna God provides, remembering the “fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic” (11: 5). Miriam and Aaron, Moses sister and brother, rebel against him, saying: “Is it through Moses alone that the Lord has spoken?” (12: 2). The twelve scouts Moses sends into the land of Canaan return with a negative report: the land is good, but its towns are fortified, and its people are like giants! As a result, the people rebel and cry out: “If only we had died in the land of Egypt!” and “If only we would die here in the wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land only to have us fall by the sword? Our wives and little ones will be taken as spoil. Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt? (14: 2-4).

“I’m hungry; my feet hurt; I have to go to the bathroom; are we there yet?”

It’s going to be a long 39 years!

***Lesson #6: Discipline in the Desert—
“The only easy day was yesterday” (Numbers 15: 1 – 17: 28)***

Rebellions continue, and the punishments are severe. God states flatly, “Anyone who acts defiantly, whether a native or an alien, reviles the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people. For having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, he must be cut off entirely and bear the punishment” (15: 30-31). After this statement, Dathan and Abiram, together with a group of Levites, lead a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses and Aaron; as a result Dathan and Abiram—and their entire families, “their wives, their children, and their little ones” (16: 27)—are swallowed alive by the earth: “They went down alive to Sheol with all belonging to them; the earth closed over them, and they disappeared from the assembly” (16: 33).

And this is only the beginning.

Assignment

Read: Numbers 10: 1 - 17: 28.

Week 4 (October 19, 20)

Lesson #7: The Red Heifer (Numbers 18: 1 – 19: 22)

In the midst of rebellion, Moses turns to the Levites, those of his own tribe, the priests. He must have their support if he is to succeed; indeed, if he is to survive! So

Moses “sweetens the pot,” giving Aaron and his sons exclusive rights at the tabernacle and a greater share in the sacrifices and the tithes.

God also introduces the “red heifer,” a red cow without blemish or defect, which will be slaughtered and its ashes used as a purification offering for those who touch a dead body. The ashes of a red heifer combined with spring water, go far beyond the ritual we studied in Leviticus 21 & 22.

The introduction of the red heifer at this point in Numbers suggests a significant increase in dead human bodies.

Lesson #8: The Deaths of Miriam and Aaron (Numbers 20: 1 – 21: 35)

Lesson #8 brings bad news and good news. First the bad news, and there’s a pile of it: Moses’ sister Miriam, who fished baby Moses out of the Nile River and brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, dies in the wilderness of Zin; Aaron, too, who had accompanied Moses in his showdown with Pharaoh in Egypt, dies at Mount Hor; Moses himself rebels against God, resulting in God forbidding Moses to enter the Promised Land; Edom forbids the Israelites from passing through their territory, a requirement for their journey to Canaan; and the entire Israelite community camps on a pile of venomous vipers, and many of them are bitten and die. Moses is now alone, sinking in a swamp of bad news—and his most difficult days are yet to come.

The good news? The Israelites defeat the king of Arad in the Negev desert, and they defeat both Sihon, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan—their first, small military victories, giving the Israelites some much-needed encouragement.

Assignment

Read: Numbers 18: 1 – 21: 35.

**NO CLASSES OCTOBER 26 – NOVEMBER 10, 2015.
DR. CREASY WILL BE LEADING AN ISRAEL TEACHING TOUR.**

Week 5 (November 16, 17)

Lesson #9: Balaam and His Talking Ass (Numbers 22: 1 – 25: 18)

Lesson #9 offers one of the great stories in the Bible, one that is really funny! The king of Edom has blocked the Israelites from traveling up the King’s Highway, north

through the eastern mountain range, so the Israelites divert west to Kadesh-Barnea, the oasis in the wilderness of Zin where they stay for the majority of their 39 years in the wilderness. Toward the end of the 39 years, however, Moses leads the Israelites *across* the King's Highway, and they enter the plains of Jericho from the east by the desert route, through the backdoor of Moab. Balak, king of Moab, is terrified of the Israelites, who have already defeated three kings, and who in their great numbers will "devour everything . . . as an ox devours the grass of the field" (22: 4). Knowing he cannot defeat the Israelites, Balak summons help from a famous prophet in the east, Balaam son of Beor. Perhaps Balaam, in his great power, will curse the Israelites for Balak, and thereby cause their defeat.

Balaam, envisioning a large payment for his services, agrees to speak with the Moabite king. Balaam's skill at the bargaining table increases the cost of his services to an astronomical level. On the way to complete his job, God slows Balaam down by sending an angel to stand on the road, blocking Balaam's ass. Balaam can't see the angel, but his ass can! After beating his ass twice for stopping, the third time the ass finally talks back to Balaam—and Balaam argues with him! It's a hilarious scene!

In the end, Balaam is unable to curse the Israelites, blessing them three times instead, so Balak fires the prophet, and that's the last we see of him.

Or is it?

Lesson #10: "Count 'em Up," again—the 2nd Census (Numbers 26: 1 – 27: 23)

Forty years have passed since the Israelites left Egypt, an entire generation. At Mt. Sinai we counted the Israelite men in the 1st census: 603,550. Now, as a new generation camps on the plains of Jericho, staging for war against the Canaanites, we count the Israelite men again in the 2nd census: 601,730. All those who left Egypt—both men and women—have died in the wilderness, all but Joshua and Caleb. Now a new generation, born in the wilderness and hardened by their experience, prepares to cross the Jordan River and begin the conquest of the "Promised Land." But first we must count up the men in each tribe, clan and family.

Once counted, the Lord tells Moses that the conquered land should be divided among the tribes in proportion to the size of each tribe. But that creates a problem. In the census, only the men, ages 20-50 who can fight, are counted. Zelophehad is among them, but he has five daughters and no sons. If the land is divided according to the number of men in each tribe, clan and family, then Zelophehad is shortchanged: his daughters will get nothing!

It seems that this never occurred to God or to Moses, so the problem is dumped into God's lap for him to solve.

Assignment

Read: Numbers 22: 1 – 27: 23.

NO CLASSES THANKSGIVING WEEK, 2015.

Week 6 (November 30, December 1)

Lesson #11: Remembering God in the Promised Land (Numbers 28: 1 – 30: 17)

After all the difficulties experienced during their generation in the wilderness—the disobedience, the outright rebellion and the disrespect they have shown to God and to Moses—God says to the Israelites that when they enter the “Promised Land” they must remember their relationship with him, obeying his commands and precepts, and they must punctuate each year with the sacrifices and festivals that celebrate their covenant with him, starting with the morning and evening daily sacrifices, and then the formal celebrations: 1) the Sabbath (or *Shabbat*, the 7th day of the week, the day of rest); 2) the New Moon Feast (or *Rosh Chodesh*—the beginning of the Hebrew month: the Hebrew calendar is lunar, not solar, so the month starts with the visible sign of the new moon); 3) Passover, (or *Pesach*, remembering the Exodus; 4) Pentecost, (or *Shavuot*, remembering the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai; 5) New Year’s Day (*Rosh Hashanah*, or the Feast of Trumpets, the start of the new year); 6) Day of Atonement (or *Yom Kippur*); and 7) Feast of Booths (Tabernacles or *Sukkot*).

Nowhere in Scripture does God ask us to promise him anything, but when the Israelites enter the “Promised Land” and settle in it, if they choose to make a vow to God, he expects them to keep it.

Lesson #12: The Spoils of War (Numbers 31: 1-54)

Once the Israelites cross the Jordan River and begin the conquest of Canaan they will spend an entire generation at war; indeed, considerably longer than a generation, since they will never fully conquer the land until the time of king David, some 500 years later.

Men fight wars for many reasons, but in the ancient world—including the world of the Hebrew Scriptures—men fight for plunder: ancient warfare may have personal, religious, political or philosophical justifications, but basically it is “beat up your neighbor and take his stuff.” The Israelites will attack those who live in the Promised Land, they will “put to the sword” all those who live there, they will take their land, and they will divide the plunder among themselves, after giving a portion to God.

Of course, this raises serious moral and philosophical issues when viewed through the lens of 21st-century Christianity. We explore some of those issues in this lesson.

Assignment

Read: Numbers 31: 1-54.

Week 7 (December 7, 8)

Lesson #13: Compromise (Numbers 32: 1-42)

The conquest of the “Promised Land” requires that all of the Israelite men ages 20-50, who are capable of fighting, cross the Jordan River and engage the enemy. The tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh don’t want to go, however. They are quite content to stay on the east side of the Jordan—a land God had not given them—for they have already conquered the people there, the towns are very nice and the pasturelands are fertile. So they refuse to go.

Moses goes ballistic!

In the end, the 2 ½ tribes agree to go, providing that they may leave their families on the east side of the Jordan River, and when the fighting is over they may come back and settle there. Moses agrees that if all the men from Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh get in the fight, when it’s over they may return.

Well, by now you know where this is going!

Lesson #14: The Itinerary (Exodus 28: 1 – 31: 18)

In Lesson #14 we follow the itinerary from Egypt to the plains of Jericho. Most people mistakenly believe that the Israelites “wandered in the wilderness” for forty years (because Moses, being a man, refused to ask for directions!).

But it’s quite the contrary: Numbers 33 reviews the stops on the journey, and we learn that the Israelites spend most of the forty years in the wilderness at the oasis in Kadesh-barnea. In this lesson we follow the stages of the journey, understanding its rationale.

Assignment

Read: Numbers 32: 1 – 33: 56.

Week 8 (December 14, 15)

Lesson #15: Allocating the Land (Numbers 34: 1 – 35: 19)

The Lord said to Moses: “When you enter the land of Canaan, this is the territory that shall fall to you as your heritage—the land of Canaan with its boundaries . . .” (35: 1). Recall that the land should be allocated in proportion to the number of men in each tribe, clan and family. We draw the boundaries in Lesson #15.

In Joshua we read of the conquest; in Judges, of its settlement. In fact, the Israelites fail to conquer the land of Canaan; they subdue portions of it, but significant pockets of resistance linger for nearly half a millennium. What’s more, we learn that once in the land, the Israelites “settled among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage, and gave their own daughters to their sons in marriage, and served their gods” (Judges 3: 5-6).

As God warned in Numbers 33: 55—“[I]f you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land before you, those whom you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they will harass you in the land where you live.”

And so it will be.

Lesson #16: Epilogue

In Lesson #16 we review the linear narrative from Genesis through Numbers, and we project its trajectory through 2 Kings (586 B.C.), drawing from our exercise the lessons taught and how those lessons may apply to 21st-century Christians.