



22 May 2016
Trinity Sunday
Choral Evensong
Numbers 9 vv. 15–23, 10 vv. 29–36
1 John 3 vv. 10–21

Numbers: In God's Wilderness

By Dr Nathan MacDonald
Fellow, Lecturer in Hebrew Bible

In one of his sermons on the book of Numbers, the early church father Origen compared Scripture to a feast of different foods. In the Bible there is everything necessary to nourish the soul. Yet Origen had to admit that some parts of the feast – unlike the exceptional feasts in this college – are more palatable than others. The book of Numbers is an excellent example of a less desirable food. The reader is tempted, says Origen, to “reject it and spit it out, as heavy and burdensome foods and as those that are not suitable to a sick and weak soul.”

For Origen the book of Numbers was full of mysteries that required a high level of spiritual maturity to decode. Young believers were best to keep to the Gospels, the letters of Paul, or the Psalms. Origen's counsel has largely been followed in modern lectionaries and Bible reading notes. And it is easy to see the reasons why. The traditional Christian title, “Numbers,” draws attention to a difficult and unattractive side of the book. The title is derived from the lengthy census that opens the book. And that is not all: the indomitable reader who ventures beyond this less-than-promising beginning will encounter extensive lists of sacrifices, priestly perquisites and way-stations in the desert. Ancient legislation, both civil and cultic, is scattered throughout the book with no apparent logic. No wonder that some have christened it “the junk-room of the Bible”. In addition, the book's storyline seems to meander with no obvious sense of direction, rather like the people of Israel themselves. This side of the book of Numbers is neatly summarized in the Hebrew name for the book, which is taken from the first words in Numbers 1 v. 1, *Bemidbar*, “in the desert.” For Israel and for the reader, the book of Numbers is an unwelcome detour on the way to destinations more interesting.

But the reader tempted to skip the book of Numbers will miss a rich treasury of stories and images. The cloud and fiery pillar, the manna and quail in the wilderness, the sending of the spies, water from the rock, the bronze serpent, and Balaam and his donkey are all to be found in the book of Numbers. Most especially on this Trinity Sunday, we should recall that it is in the pages of Numbers that we find the beautiful priestly blessing, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (NRSV). Since Martin Luther popularized the use of the blessing at the end of Eucharist services, Protestant Christians have heard a clear allusion to the Triune God in the threefold repetition of the divine name.

It is the origins of the book of Numbers that are, perhaps, just as remarkable as its little vignettes. For this book is the bridge between the two great legal corpora of the Old Testament: on the one hand, the collection of cultic instructions that we find in Exodus and Leviticus, which seems to have originated in temple circles; on the other hand, the great civil code that we find in Deuteronomy, which may well have originated in court circles.



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Both law codes are attributed to God himself, delivered through the hand of Moses, And – here’s the rub – both law codes overlap with one another at certain points, but not exactly. The composers of the Pentateuch resisted the temptation to choose one lawcode over the other, and canonized them both. They preserved them both through a wonderfully creative act of harmonization and conflation. The one they made into the law given to Moses upon Mount Sinai, and the other they presented as Moses’ repetition of the law some forty years later in the land of Moab just before the people of Israel entered the Promised Land. They explained the need for this act of repetition by telling a story of how the Exodus generation had disobeyed God’s command to go up into the Promised Land. As a result that generation had been punished and, instead, their children had inherited the Promised Land with Moses’ sermon on the plains of Moab ringing in their ears.

It is for this reason that the book traverses a geographical journey from Sinai to Moab. The opening verse reads “And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai”, and the final verse closes “These are the commandments and ordinance which the Lord commanded by Moses to the people of Israel in the plains of Moab”. And as we move from Sinai to Moab the ancient Jewish scribes set about the considerably task of harmonizing the laws of the Pentateuch. Creating new laws and rituals that blend the contradictory perspectives of priestly and civil law. If to our eyes the results are a bewildering patchwork of lists, rituals, stories, laws, itineraries and poetry, it is because we have failed to recognize the higher task of concord that the scribes were seeking to achieve. We want a consistent narrative plot-line; they were creating the harmony of the divine law.

I want to invite you then to view the authors of Numbers as scribes and scholars, kindred minds though separated from us by millenia. They attempted to find order and harmony, to preserve and develop. This was scholarship as the ancient world knew it, albeit in many ways very different from what we would regard as scholarship. Yet this is not a lecture, and I do not want you simply to understand and admire past intellectuals. Instead, I would like to invite you to contemplate their contribution to Jewish and ultimately Christian spirituality. As those who have sought to understand who God is and how to properly orientate ourselves to him. Despite his many detractors, Origen’s assessment that the book was full of spiritual mysteries may not be misjudged. There would be a great deal to say here. The book contributes much to thinking about generational responsibility and the need for teaching and learning. It says much about oaths: the power of our words. It is one of the earliest examples of seeing service of God through the lens of military imagery: a rich stream for Christian piety, but one fraught with danger as is brought home to us every day on the news.

This evening I want to remind you that it is to the writers of the book of Numbers especially that we owe the idea of the desert as a place of spiritual testing and growth, a place not of absence, but a place of encounter with God.

In seeking to harmonize the two great legal traditions which they were bequeathed, the writers of Numbers tell the story of desert wanderings. After leaving Mount Sinai the people quickly come to the edge of the Promised Land. But when the spies bring back reports of a land filled with mighty warriors, the people abandon their trust in God and refuse to enter the land. As punishment God condemns them to wander in the desert, but also sets upon the task of spiritually disciplining them. The time in the desert consists of story after story of rebellion and disobedience, but finally we reach the famous story of the Bronze Serpent. As with all the other stories it begins with murmuring against God and Moses, but it ends with the people believing. The transformative effect of God’s discipline in the desert is proclaimed in the triumphant last word of the story: וַיֵּחַי ‘and he lives’. The stories of death in the desert have become a story of life. And as we heard in our second reading, this imagery of death giving way to life is seized upon by the apostle John himself to describe the work of our Lord and Saviour.

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In the book of Numbers the desert has become a place of life because of the presence of God. In our first readings this evening we heard about the visual signs of God's presence: the cloud by day and the fire by night. This imagery is perhaps familiar to us, and the idea of God meeting us in the desert has become a fixed part in Christian spirituality: from Jesus's temptation in the wilderness to the desert fathers in Egypt and William Williams' *Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this Barren Land*. But in the world of Ancient Near East religions the desert was not the place to encounter the gods. The gods dwelt in the great city temples. In the sophisticated cultic theologies of Assyria and Babylonia, the gods were believed to be present in the cult images that were served by the numerous ranks of priests. But in ancient Israel, the shattering experience of defeat and exile had destroyed any idea that God was simply present and available in a cult statue or a temple. They had discovered that God was present in the margins, in enforced migration, when all support and comfort had been torn away. God in the desert. In the very last place that we would expect to encounter God, he is there.

Amen