

NUMBERS
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In the Introduction, I offered a brief outline of the history of opinion as to the authorship of the Torah and the historical setting within which the various books emerged till they found the form in which we now have them (see pages 18-27). It is an extremely complex area and there is as yet no overall scholarly consensus. In regard to the Book of Numbers, however, there is one area where there is consensus; namely, that most of the book is from the Priestly School. This is clear from the content, from the style and from the vocabulary.

Where there is as yet no consensus is in regard to the date. However, it seems to me that the convergence of probabilities points to well on in the post-exilic period, even as much as one hundred years after the return. Baruch A. Levine writes in the Introduction to the first volume of his commentary on Numbers (Anchor Bible, Doubleday 1993, page 107):

It would be accurate to state in summary that the priestly materials in Numbers 1-20 (as in Numbers as a whole) represent, by and large, the further development of priestly law and historiography well into the post-exilic period. Such development was not merely a matter of redactional activity, but also involved new writings by the post-exilic priesthood in Jerusalem and their associates.

What seems to have happened is that in the post-exilic period the process of editing the text of the other books of the Torah stopped, so that the texts of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy achieved the fixed form that has come down to us. To re-interpret, update and complement cultic legislation and custom a new book was therefore necessary. The new book is Numbers. The post-exilic priest authors carried on the tradition of asserting that developments in the cult were consistent with the essential revelation given by YHWH to Moses on Mount Sinai. In Numbers this refers to developments that happened in the period of the second temple.

As is often the case in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the legislation is presented through story. The narrative material which tells the story of various happenings on the journey of the Israelites from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab east of the Jordan is drawn from older sources, edited by the priest authors. This is seen from an examination of the way the wilderness period was viewed by the pre-exilic prophets. We look first at the prophets in the northern kingdom just before the fall of Samaria (721BC).

In the Amos scroll there are only two references to the wilderness period. In one, the focus is on YHWH, as we would expect, and on YHWH's fidelity to the special love that he has for his people:

I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness.

– Amos 2:10

Clearly the story of the Exodus generation having to spend forty years in the wilderness (see Numbers 14:33) was not an invention of the post-exilic priests. However, we cannot have the same assurance when it comes to the stories about YHWH giving instructions concerning sacrifice in the Tabernacle (see especially Numbers 6-7), especially when we read in Amos:

Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

– Amos 5:25

The wilderness tradition

The expected answer is 'No'. Amos associates sacrifices with a later, settled period. The same doubts arise when we read Jeremiah. He has YHWH declare:

In the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.

– Jeremiah 7:22

Hosea thinks of the wilderness period as one when YHWH showed special love to his new bride. Addressing his no longer faithful contemporaries, Hosea pictures YHWH alluring Israel back into the wilderness in order to:

speak tenderly to her ... there she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

– Hosea 2:14-15

Later in the scroll (9:10) Hosea speaks, once again, of YHWH's special love and fidelity, but this time his reference to Israel's response is not as positive. YHWH declares:

Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel.
Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors.
But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame,
and became detestable like the thing they loved.

Numbers has a lot to say about YHWH's fidelity. When it comes to Israel's response, the accent is very heavily on their lack of trust, complaining and rebellion. One such story is that referred to in Hosea: the story of Baal-peor (see Numbers 25). This is one example of a story recorded in Numbers that could be very ancient indeed.

In contrast to his own period – that of Judah just before the terrible events of the opening years of the sixth century BC – Jeremiah sees the period of the wilderness journey as an idyllic period. Not only did YHWH express his special love for Israel, but Israel responded with a special love. Jeremiah was instructed to declare to the people:

Thus says YHWH: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.
Israel was holy to YHWH, the first fruits of his harvest.

– Jeremiah 2:2-3

Thus says YHWH: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest, YHWH appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

– Jeremiah 31:2-3

Deuteronomy, too, speaks of YHWH's love for his people during their wilderness journey and in Canaan:

YHWH sustained Israel in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste;
he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye.
As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young;
as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions,
YHWH alone guided him; no foreign god was with him.
He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field;
he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock;
curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs and rams;

Bashan bulls and goats, together with the choicest wheat –
you drank fine wine from the blood of grapes.

– Deuteronomy 32:10-14

The other theme – that of Israel's infidelity – is highlighted in Psalm 78:1-8.

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of YHWH, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.
He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

The central religious conviction of ancient Israel, a conviction which was inherited by the Jews in post-exilic Judah and which is still at the heart of Judaism, is that their very existence as a people came from a decision of God: 'Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). The authors of the Book of Numbers believed that YHWH revealed himself to their ancestors on Mount Sinai, and that he wanted to be with them as they journeyed from Sinai to the Promised Land. They used this journey as a vehicle to reflect on the nature of their God, on God's will for Israel, and on what it means to put one's trust in YHWH and to obey YHWH's will. They also picked up that element of the tradition which focused on Israel's infidelity, and used it as an object lesson for their contemporaries. They wanted to ensure that the mistakes of the past, mistakes which had led to the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the ensuing exile, were not repeated, for their very identity as a people depended on their faithfulness to their covenant with God.

Numbers focuses on the failure of the Exodus generation to believe, a failure that resulted in their not enjoying the Promised Land. It is of value to read again the texts in Exodus where this theme is already present: At Marah, where they complained because there was no water to drink (Exodus 15:22-27, see page 86); when they complained of hunger and YHWH sent them manna (Exodus 16, see pages 87-90); and then again at Rephidim when God gave them water from the rock (Exodus 17:1-7, pages 91-92).

The journey in the wilderness is portrayed as a time when again and again YHWH demonstrated his fidelity to Israel. At the same time, it was a time when, again and again, Israel failed to trust. In this are the seeds of the kinds of rebellion that would bring about the collapse of the northern kingdom in 721BC, and of Judah in 598BC and 586BC. If Judah is to survive it is imperative that they remember YHWH's special love for them and be faithful to the covenant. This means remembering and not repeating the mistakes of their past.

The wilderness in Exodus

Both these themes are developed by Ezra when he reflects on the wilderness journey in his prayer proclaimed before the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them. But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go.

You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

– Nehemiah 9:15-21

The priest authors of Numbers spend the first ten chapters highlighting the exact obedience of Moses and the people to YHWH's instructions. They introduce the theme of complaint from the first verses of the journey from Sinai (see Number 11:1ff). It is evident from what we have seen that both these themes are traditional. Though there is as yet no consensus among scholars as to when the Book of Numbers was written, in this commentary I am espousing the point of view of those who are persuaded that the text of Numbers as we have it is post-exilic and from the latter part of the Persian period (late fifth century BC).

I have already referred to Levine. I will note here two other scholars who hold the same basic position as this commentary. Mary Douglas in her *In the wilderness: the doctrine of defilement in the Book of Numbers* (JSOT Supplement, Sheffield 1993 page 98) writes: 'Numbers complements the other Books by presenting a coherent mythic background for Judah's political situation after the exile'. Thomas Römer, in his excellent summary of the state of scholarship in regard to Numbers, says: 'She is certainly right' ('Israel's sojourn in the wilderness and the construction of the Book of Numbers' in *Reflection and Refraction: studies in biblical historiography in honour of A. Graeme Auld* [Vetus Testamentum, Supplement 113, 2005, page 443]).

In any case, stories have a way of conveying meaning that transcends particular times and situations. There is a lot of agreement on this, and I hope to be able to convey these stories in such a way as to highlight their central thrust. We should be looking not for an accurate historical record of facts, but for the kind of truth that is expressed in story: truths especially about God, but also about how we must live if we want to experience God's blessing in our lives.

Post-exilic

The Book of Numbers continues on from the Books of Exodus and Leviticus. In the opening chapters Moses and the people are still at Mount Sinai preparing to set out for the Promised Land. In a profound and real sense every generation has to make this journey. It is important that we make the journey with God, listening to his inspiration and guided by his Spirit. If my reading of the text is correct, the authors of Numbers were writing for a people who were constantly being reminded of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the loss of much of the Promised Land. When they searched for reasons, they found a consistent explanation in their sacred literature which continued to present YHWH as faithful. The problem was not YHWH; it was people's stubborn refusal to listen. The Book of Numbers, therefore, after highlighting the necessity of exact obedience to YHWH, is full of warnings as it tells the story of the journey from Sinai to the Promised Land, focusing on their stubborn disobedience as the reason why the first generation failed to complete the journey. Their sin must not be repeated.