

NUMBERS

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SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of Scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapse, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and

5. *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jeremiah 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by

8. *Sermon* 212.2.

doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadowboxing of theological concepts.

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically

fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Israel's forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, much of which is recorded in Numbers, was a time of revelation and care by God, a time of testing, and a time of judgment and blessing. Just as Jacob-Israel wrestled with God (Gen. 32:24) after crossing the ford of the Jabbok River, so too Israel wrestled with God during those forty years after crossing the Red Sea. They too came away limping but blessed. One of the lessons of Numbers is that encountering God and the things of God is no light thing. God desires to bring blessing to his chosen people, to all nations, and to all creation, and central to this blessing is the gift of God's presence. For us sinful mortals, however, the warmth of God's life-giving presence is also a burning fire that tests us and ultimately cleanses us to make us holy. All this, in fact, is blessing.

When I accepted the invitation to participate in this commentary series, I knew that I was in for a challenging yet rewarding journey as I encountered more fully this particular "thing of God," the book of Numbers. Certainly part of the challenge and reward of this project is its cross-disciplinary nature. For a theologian to tread in the territory of the great Old Testament scholars, past and contemporary, who have commented on Numbers and the issues contained in it is no light thing. My appreciation for the work of those who have gone before me has only increased. And yet I also see the need for Christian theologians and ethicists to be more deeply immersed in the biblical witness. The particular vision and expertise that we bring to the exegetical task will make a helpful contribution, for there is a great need for Christian interpreters of the Bible to speak forthrightly from and to the full doctrinal and lived tradition of the church. As a result of this project, my own vocation as a Christian scholar was further refined, and I came away with deeper questions about the way the theological disciplines have been divided.

Working on Numbers has also challenged me on another level. The high vision this part of Christian scripture paints of who the people of God are to be, especially

in the first ten chapters, is deeply challenging. It has increased my dedication to the church as a visible and holy body of people and made me glad for the ways that God has been faithful to shape the church over time. Yet it also showed me more clearly ways that the church bodies I am part of, and I as an individual, fall short of God's intentions. Numbers does contain words of grace, but it also reminds us that God's work in our lives is often painful. "Count the cost" is one of its implicit messages, while the images of the Nazirite, Joshua, Caleb, and Phineas call us to accept that challenge. Listening to that message over and over changes one.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the people and institutions that have supported me and walked beside me during this long encounter with Numbers. Western Theological Seminary, my professional home, is a wonderful community in which to work. My thanks go to all the faculty, staff, and students who have provided resources, time, conversation, questions, and encouragement to me throughout my research and writing. I especially appreciate the time and trouble that Tom Boogaart and Brent Strawn, colleagues at Western and Candler, took to read and make helpful suggestions on draft portions of the manuscript. I am also grateful to Western for the sabbatical leave that allowed me to devote a year to this project while living in St. Andrews, Scotland. Many thanks to all the people of St. Mary's College and the congregation at All Saints Church in St. Andrews for creating a welcoming and warm space for my family and me during our year there. Jonathan Mason, the people at All Saints, and our neighbors Alec and Marlene went above and beyond good Scottish hospitality and opened their lives and hearts to us; their gift of friendship and community was priceless and will not be forgotten. Nathan MacDonald not only gave me access to his astute intellect and expertise in Numbers, but also to his office and library—both were great gifts to me. My immediate family, ever patient with fascinating details about Balaam and the laws of Numbers, deserves special thanks for all their love, support, and understanding during what I know seems to them like a very long journey. The great joy that they give me is like water in the desert. And finally, thanks to the good and visionary people at Brazos Press. I am grateful for their trust and encouragement at all points during the project. Robert Wilken's early comments and Rusty Reno's careful reading, comments, suggestions, and encouragement were invaluable. I am also appreciative of David Aiken's careful editorial work.

May God bless all these wonderful people. I hope this work will be a blessing to others, helping them to hear God speaking through Numbers to guide, comfort, and challenge us all to live as saints.

All Saints Day 2008

INTRODUCTION

My child, when you come to serve the Lord,
prepare yourself for testing.

—Sirach 2:1

Numbers begins with the words “the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai,” a phrase that alerts readers they are with Moses and Israel in the middle of a story, the story of the chosen yet sinful people of God on their way from the slavery of Egypt through the wilderness toward life in the promised land.

Many readers of Numbers, coming across the words “in the wilderness” know that this phrase is more than simply a geographical designation. It is a phrase linked with the many foundational experiences of Israel during its forty years on the way from Egypt to the promised land, experiences that form the heart of the Pentateuch. The basic plot of this time is this: God frees the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt and brings them to Sinai. There God reveals himself to them and gives them a vision and covenant that tells them they are to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6), living out God’s designs for a renewed humanity amid the nations. Numbers begins at Mount Sinai, where Israel gladly and obediently accepts this vision and begins its journey to the promised land, where it will put this vision into practice. But very quickly the people of Israel start grumbling about their food, about their social status, and amid fears and lies they end up rejecting God’s plans for them. The situations and hardships they encounter in the wilderness are occasions of testing for them, and through them their sin and unfaithfulness to God and his plans are revealed. God punishes them and disciplines them, delaying their entrance into the promised land until they spend forty years in the wilderness. Toward the end of these forty years God leads them to confession and a newfound obedience. God is determined to bless

them in spite of their sin. He gives Israel a renewed start and finally leads it to the edge of the promised land of Canaan.¹

While those foundational experiences of Israel with God are in one sense unrepeatable, later Israelite and Christian traditions have often understood aspects of Israel's forty years in the wilderness as patterns or figures for their own experiences. Israelite prophets before and during Israel's Babylonian exile prophesy about a new wilderness journey from exile to the promised land. Even after their return from exile, the people of God come to expect they will be led by God into yet another new beginning in the wilderness. The gospel writers portray Jesus's life as a final wilderness experience of God's chosen people—"final" here in the sense of goal or *telos*—in which Christ overcomes the temptations that Israel succumbed to, fulfilling in his own life the calling of the whole people. The life of the church before the expected return of Christ as well as the life of believers between their baptism and their own resurrection are also likened to the experience of Israel in the desert. As such, Numbers not only informs us of Israel's historical, physical journey, but as scripture, it authoritatively shapes and finds itself in mutual conversation with Christian understandings of the calling, purposes, and commandments given to the people of God in other times and places; tells us much about God's reactions to sin and plans for blessing his people; and also alerts us to the temptations common to God's people.

This, at least, is how Christians have often read this scriptural text in the past.

Given the advent of modern historical-critical scholarship, such readings that focus on the narrative continuity of Numbers with the rest of scripture and its figural resonances with Christ and the church have been called into question on a number of fronts. But a central conviction of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible is that reading scripture with an eye to the "rule or canon of truth" passed on through the Nicene tradition of the church will help clarify rather than obscure the meaning of Numbers. Accordingly, I will approach the text as Christian scripture, as an authoritative part of a larger canon of writings. This mosaic of writings refers to a unified work of God that encompasses both the economy of creation and the economy of redemption and that has a christological shape and center.

One implication of these commitments is that priority will be given to the final form of the text. I will seek to uncover the distinctive voice of the final form of Numbers while, on the one hand, noting how this form grew out of earlier traditions and, on the other hand, attending to the place of Numbers within the Pentateuch and the larger witness of Christian scripture. I will also highlight how this voice interacts with other theologians and traditions within Christian

1. Israel's wilderness time stretches from crossing the Red Sea out of Egypt to crossing the Jordan River into the promised land. More precisely, the forty years in the wilderness is officially marked from the time they departed Egypt (33:38; cf. Exod. 12) to the death of Aaron (Num. 20:22–29).

history. Numbers has a distinctive voice that both harmonizes with and at times adds a contrapuntal and tension-filled melody to the larger chorus of scripture and later tradition. It is this voice that I hope to make come alive through this commentary, trusting that this voice is a usual means in, under, and through which God's voice can be heard.

Besides these foundational assumptions, a few other assumptions about the structure and themes of Numbers and the relationship between its laws and narratives should be made clear.

Numbers is not easy reading. Just as the books of the Old and New Testaments, depending on how one views them, can appear to be either a jumble of ill-matched pieces from perhaps different puzzles or a complex yet beautiful mosaic whose bold and subtle patterns continue to surprise us, so too the different parts of Numbers. It presents us with a variety of genres, primarily narrative and lawlike material, that seem to interrupt each other and whose connections to each other are neither explicitly stated nor easily seen. Furthermore, its integrity as a book—that it has an overall sense on its own—is often called into question. Yet there is a way to understand its coherence—and this perspective guides my commentary—which clarifies its subtle yet quite beautiful patterns and shows Numbers to be an artfully constructed text in which seemingly disparate parts work together to emphasize central themes.

The structure of Numbers has been a matter of debate within recent scholarship. Dennis Olson's landmark study *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New* discerned the structure of the book and its place within the larger structure of the Pentateuch, this in light of little sustained attention having been given to the question and even less agreement about it in modern (specifically after 1861) biblical studies.² Part of the problem Olson found is that modern scholars mainly focused on the sources that went into the composition of Numbers, rather than on the final composition itself.³ For example, the theology and themes of the theoretical Yahwist (J) source were thoroughly examined, while the final form of Numbers was neglected. As a result, the forest was lost for the trees.

A related but opposite problem emerged as scholars began attending to the shape of the Pentateuch (or Hexateuch). Some proposed ways of understanding

2. Olson 1996: 31 writes: "The central problem in the interpretation of the book of Numbers . . . is the failure to detect a convincing and meaningful structure for the book. Little systematic discussion of the structure of Numbers can be found in the scholarly literature. Commentaries often simply propose an outline with little or no comment or defense. Numerous interpreters lament the difficulty of determining any coherent plan or outline. Martin Noth's observations are typical: 'From the point of view of its contents, the book lacks unity, and it is difficult to see any pattern in its construction.'" Stephen Sherwood, whose commentary focuses on literary issues, writes: "Apart from an outline of the book, I have not found any proposed structure convincing" (*Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Berit Olam [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002], 110).

3. Olson's analysis (1996: 9–31) of the scholarship on Numbers suggests this, and Won Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel's Migratory Campaign* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), xi, writes: "Until the mid-twentieth century, pentateuchal scholarship predominantly focused on the formation of parts of the Pentateuch rather than the entire work."

the larger literary structure of the first five (or six) books of the Bible have a tendency to undermine the integrity of the individual books. This is especially true for Numbers. The first part of the book (1:1–10:10) tends to get lopped off and attached to the “Sinai cycle” that extends from the arrival of Israel at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19), through Leviticus, up to their departure from “the wilderness of Sinai” (Num. 10:11–12).⁴ Now our “tree,” Numbers, gets lost in the forest of the Pentateuch. The question of structure thus becomes one of making sense of the integrity and structure of the whole book while also seeing the part it plays in the larger shape of the Pentateuch.

There are two main keys to this structural puzzle, each of which has important implications for the interpretation of Numbers: the tripartite structure of the book and the seven rebellions in its middle section. The book has three major parts that form an ABA’ pattern:

- A 1:1–10:10
- B 10:11–25:18
- A’ 26:1–36:13

The first part of the book has many parallels to the last part (cf. Olson 1996: 5–6):

- censuses taken (1–4 and 26)
- lists of leaders (1 and 34)
- laws concerning *gō’ēl* (5 and 35)
- laws concerning a woman (5) or women (27, 30, 36)
- laws concerning a vow (6) or vows (30)
- attention to holy places (7–8) and holy land (34)
- setting aside of Levites (8) and Levitical towns (35)
- Passover celebrated (9) and its offerings detailed (28)
- details of the silver trumpets (10) and Trumpets Festival offerings (29)

4. Rolf Rendtorff’s proposed cycles in Genesis (*Das Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* [Berlin: Gruyter, 1977]) is extended to the whole Pentateuch by Wenham 1981: 14–18, who understands Numbers to have three main blocks of material grouped around locations: the Sinai cycle, the Kadesh cycle, and the Plains of Moab cycle. This broad tripartite division is right, but on grounds that go beyond location. Gray 1903: xxiii writes: “The first section of Numbers (1:1–10:10) may be regarded as an appendix to the Books of Exodus and Leviticus.” Noth 1968: 2 writes: “From this indication of the contents it is already clear that the book is not a self-contained unit” and must be seen only as a part of the larger Pentateuch, having no clear structure of its own. Seeing a clear structure in 10:11–36:13, Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness*, 288–90, divides 1:1–10:10 from the rest of the book and groups it with either the priestly materials in Exod. 25:1–Num. 10:10 or a larger block of preparatory events of the failed campaign for the conquest of the promised land (Exod. 1:1–Num. 10:10).

Olson helpfully highlights the importance of the censuses of the people and the Levites as key indicators of the “obedient beginnings” of the exodus generation in Num. 1–10 and the “rise of a new generation of hope” in Num. 26.⁵ While the theme of God’s faithfulness to Israel in assuring the passing on of his blessings and promises from one generation to the next is important, on its own it does not illuminate clearly enough the way the book pivots around the central rebellion section and, more specifically, the events of Num. 13–14. Instead, the book is better understood as beginning with a summary vision of who Israel is to be (A) and then moving to an extended narrative (B) of the failure of Israel to live up to this vision. While Israel’s failure is centered on the rebellion of Num. 13–14, the narratives in the central third of the book also highlight the persistence of God in his work to ultimately bless his people in spite of their sin. The final third of the book is devoted to the renewed start and reorganization of the people for life in the promised land (A’).

This tripartite understanding of the overall structure of Numbers can account for many features of the text. On a literary level, it coheres with the text’s physical markers (i.e., topographical and geographical references), chronological markers, and the shifts in tone (from positive to negative to positive)—all of which point to a three-part division of the book. It accounts for the central place of the rebellion (Num. 13–14) in the book. It also has place for the chiasitic structure of the seven rebellions, which in turn helps to illuminate the relationship between the book’s laws and narrative material. Most important, it provides the book with a coherent overall thematic structure that in large and small ways helps make good sense of the individual pieces of the book. While I will briefly overview how this thematic movement clarifies the role of the different pieces of Numbers in the larger whole, the full fruit of this will be seen in the commentary proper.

The three-part thematic movement of the book concerns the shifts in Israel’s relationship to God, three different legs of its spiritual journey as a community or nation.⁶ This movement may be summed up in three phrases: (1) the identity and organization of God’s holy people, (2) the struggles of Israel and God with Israel’s unfaithfulness, and (3) the reorganization of Israel for life in the promised land.⁷ Every section of the book can be seen to cohere with and add to these summative themes.

Numbers 1–10 focuses on the structure of the people, their politics, so to speak. God is organizing Israel to be a holy people, as he has done already since the people arrived at Sinai. This opening third of the book functions like an

5. While he primarily divides the book in two (Num. 1–25 and Num. 26–36), Olson 1996: 133 also observes that “a positive tone is struck” in the “major break” in Num. 21.

6. “Spiritual” here simply points to Israel’s relationship to God. It is not spiritual in any sort of a reductive sense—their relationship to God embraces every aspect of their lives.

7. Ashley 1993: 8 applies Brueggemann’s terms—“orientation, disorientation, reorientation”—to Numbers; see Walter Brueggemann, “Psalms and the Life of Faith,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17 (1980): 3–32.

overall summary of who Israel is to be, touching on all the major aspects of its life. Its tribal and leadership structures (Num. 1–4), the role of law in the formation of its ethical vision (Num. 5–6), and the worship life of the people (Num. 7–10) all play central parts in the identity and life of Israel. For example, the ordering of the five representative laws in Num. 5–6 shows that the goal of God’s law and work with Israel is to move it toward blessing and a life of shalom (→6:22–27).

In the central part of the book, the people’s lack of faithfulness to this vision and covenant and God’s effort to move Israel from faithlessness to faithfulness and holiness are clearly the main themes. As the people move away from the mountain of revelation toward life in the promised land (10:11), they begin obediently. But as they enter into the journey, their obedience and faithfulness go only so far. In the wilderness the hearts of the people are laid bare—their hardships test them and their sins are revealed. Their unfaithfulness also tests the patience of the Lord, revealing God’s holiness and mercy. Israel eventually rejects the promised land and the kind of relationship with God it represents at the very heart of the book (Num. 14). However, this rejection is not the end of the story. The end of the book offers signs of hope that one day God’s purposes for Israel will be fulfilled, and Israel does take steps toward this goal. A change occurs in both the vow that Israel takes (21:1–3) and the direction of God’s action toward Israel in the episode of the bronze serpent (21:4–9). Both episodes point to an inner change in Israel that occurs as the older generation dies out and the new comes of age. Their vow indicates that Israel is coming to accept God’s leadership. In the bronze serpent episode, Israel is directed to see its sin, and it symbolically triumphs over it by turning to and accepting God’s goodness. The physical healing of the poison in Israel indicates the possibility of an inner spiritual healing of the people. As a result of this partial “sanctification,” battles and movements in the wilderness take on a more positive tone as Israel moves toward the blessing of God through Balaam.

The final four chapters of this central section bring the wrestling of God and Israel in the wilderness to an unexpected, but fitting, climax. In the chapters concerning Balaam (Num. 22–24), the original vision of who Israel is called to be is spoken again, and God is faithful to bring his intentions to pass. Israel will be blessed by God, in spite of the machinations of the nations and powers that surround it. But in a stunning turn of events, sin within rather than evil without threatens Israel’s fulfillment of its vocation. Israel’s apostasy in the episode of the Baal of Peor (Num. 25), juxtaposed as it is with the Balaam chapters, shows that even in spite of Israel’s sin, God will not abandon it, but will continue to move Israel toward blessing. And in this episode, the best of the new generation is represented in Phineas. In his zeal for the holiness of God, he is a seed of hope and role model for what Israel should be. Altogether, the central part of the book speaks clearly of the temptations that the people of God face, of God’s faithfulness and longsuffering patience with his people, and of the way that God uses the trials

and temptations of his people to form them (or at least key representatives of the new generation) into people of holiness.

In the final third of the book, which recapitulates the first part, the people are again organized as a holy people. Their forty-year punishment and testing, which eventually leads them to the renewed blessing by Balaam, is over. Even though they do not live completely according to the ideal set for them in the first part of the book, they overcome the temptations and obstacles that would keep them from crossing the Jordan. More specific directions are given for what their life as the people of God should look like when they reach the promised land, instructions that fill out what it means to be a holy and priestly people living among the nations.

The holiness and faithfulness required of the people of God in order to live into their covenantal vocation is the central theme throughout the book. The first and third parts show what Israel's vocation entails in visible polity and worship life. The crucial middle part of the book shows the struggle needed to create a holy zeal and faithfulness in this sinful yet chosen people who are called to be blessed, to be holy, and to bear the name of God among the nations.

Just as the ABA' structure sheds light on the book's overall thematic movement and the role the individual sections play in the book, a second key element of the book's structure does something similar. Within the central part, Israel rebels against God and his will seven times. The number seven plays a role in the opening chapters of the book, as the phrase "at the command of the LORD" appears seven times in Num. 3–4 and seven times in Num. 9, underscoring Israel's obedience. Perhaps these groupings are meant to contrast with the seven rebellions (Milgrom 1990: xxxi), which are arranged in a chiasm. Attending to this chiasmic structure helps with both the interpretation of these rebellions and another interpretational challenge of the book: the relationship between its lawlike and narrative pieces.

Comprised of a series of elements presented and then paired in inverted order, chiasmic structures are common in the Pentateuch. Milgrom notes that "the main structural device, to judge by its attestation in nearly every chapter in Numbers, is chiasm and introversion" (1990: xxii).⁸ I am convinced that the seven rebellions follow the pattern ABCDC'B'A'.⁹ The patterning of these episodes shows a deci-

8. Milgrom distinguishes between chiasm, which has two paired elements (ABB'A'), and introversion, which has at least three (ABxB'A'). While chiasms can be purely esthetic devices, introversions are meant to teach something: "The central member frequently contains the main point of the author, climaxing what precedes and anticipating what follows" (1990: xxii). Milgrom points out a major chiasm in the structure of the Pentateuch (i.e., elements of Numbers have similarities to elements recorded in Exodus, and these pairings center on the revelation of God at Mount Sinai) and also points out introversions in many chapters of Numbers; he does not, however, notice the chiasmic structure of the rebellions. Admittedly, there is danger in finding chiasms everywhere; I will let the reader decide whether the chiasm of the rebellions is persuasive and illuminates the interpretation.

9. The only modern writer who notices this structure is Thomas Römer, "De la périphérie au centre: Les livres du Lévitique et des Nombres dans le débat actuel sur la Pentateuque," *Colloquium biblicum lovaniense* 55 (2006): 1–21, but perhaps Matthew noticed it (Matt. 4:1–11): the three

sive, yet subtle, editorial hand by the writer or redactor, which draws attention to the central element: the important story of the spying out of the promised land and Israel's rejection of it and desire to go back to Egypt.¹⁰

This chiasmic structure divides the lawlike material and minor narrative material in the central part of the book into four sections (15:1–41; 17:12–20:1; 20:14–29; 21:10–35), which follow the last four rebellions. The major themes of these four sections correspond to the themes of the rebellions that precede them. In general, these laws and narratives suggest positive characteristics and practices of the people of God that are opposite to or help correct the negative characteristics and sins that beset Israel in the previous rebellions.

This relationship suggests three things about how to interpret the lawlike material in Numbers: (1) the larger narrative is primary; (2) the laws are not simply deposited in Numbers in a haphazard fashion, but were carefully placed in order to comment on the narrative; and (3) these laws should be read with an eye for how the law, if properly obeyed, would shape the character of Israel over time. Understanding the significance of the laws in Numbers in this way naturally opens up figural readings of them, for the virtuous characteristics implied in obedience to the laws are of continuing interest to the people of God, even if the precise form of the law cannot be obeyed given changed cultural contexts.

Read in these ways, Numbers is a book that focuses on the vocation of the people of God and the sins that constantly work to keep Israel from fulfilling it. Because of this, Numbers is a wonderful book for the Christian church to reflect on in the midst of the important contemporary discussions about the nature and mission of the church. Numbers pushes the Christian church toward an incredibly high view of its calling, while at the same time being utterly realistic about the ways the people of God fail to fully live into it. It pushes us to be a people of zeal and hope and of humility and honesty. My hope is that this commentary will help Christians attune their ears to the divine speech that will correct, form, and guide us into truth and action concerning the matters touched on in this rich part of Christian scripture.

temptations of Christ seem to roughly correspond to B (food), C (temple or priestly leadership), and D (kingdom or promised land). The A elements can be seen as introductions and summaries.

10. The centrality of the spy episode is well argued by Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness*, 213–82, who divides Num. 10:31–36:13 at 15:1, right after this episode. However, given the chiasmic structure, there is no need to *divide* the book at this episode; rather Num. 13–14 is at the *center* of the *central* section, and the spy episode may well be the key text for understanding the redaction of the Pentateuch.