

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING NUMBERS

In order to appreciate how the narrative of Numbers works (both the journey and the various surrounding matters), you need to recall several items from Genesis and Exodus. First, the primary driving force behind everything is God's promise/covenant with Abraham that his seed would inherit the land of Canaan. This is what keeps the narrative going in all of its parts. And God will bring about the fulfillment of that covenant promise, even in the face of Israel's reluctance and disobedience.

Second, the conquest of the land involves the second stage of the holy war. The first stage—against Pharaoh in Exodus—even though led by Moses, was carried out by God the Divine Warrior through miraculous intervention. In this second stage, God intends his own people to be involved. He rescued them from slavery in order to make them his own people and place them in the land, but they must take ownership of the actual conquest of the land. This accounts for the two census lists, which count the men who can fight and put the tribes in battle formation around the tabernacle. The list at the beginning (from which Numbers derives its name) prepares the first generation for conquest by way of Kadesh; the second prepares the second generation for conquest by way of the Transjordan. This motif also accounts for the various narratives at the end, including the succession of Joshua (27:12–23) and the various matters in chapters 31–36 that anticipate the conquest.

Third, recall that in Genesis 12:7, immediately following the promise of the land, Abraham built an altar to the Lord. As you now read the various law portions interspersed within this narrative, you will find that they focus primarily on the Israelites' relationship with their God. Thus both the central role of the tabernacle and the priestly matters in Numbers continue to focus on two previous concerns in the Pentateuch to this point: *the presence of God* in the midst of his people—both his being with them and his guiding their journey—and *the proper worship of God* once they are settled in the land.

Finally, God's people themselves do not come off well in Numbers. You can hardly miss the relentless nature of their complaints and disobedience. In fact, apart from the future blessing that God speaks through a pagan prophet, there is hardly a good word about them in the entire narrative. The same complaints against God and his chosen leader Moses that began in Exodus 15:22–17:7—and then some—are repeated here (Num 11–12; 14; 16–17; 20:1–13; 21:4–9). This is simply not fun reading. In the New Testament, the Israelites' disobedience serves as warning for us (1 Cor 10:1–13; cf. Heb 3:7–13); in the Old Testament, even though their sins are expressly remembered, so also is God's "great compassion" on them (Neh 9:16–21; cf. Pss 78:14–39; 106:24–33, 44–46; see also the invitation and warning in Ps 95).

Thus, even though the narrative has some abrupt shifts of focus, Numbers carries on the burden of the Pentateuch in grand style. You are not allowed to forget that, despite Israel's waffling, this is God's story above all, and God will keep his part of the covenant with Abraham regarding his seed inheriting the land. At issue is whether Israel will keep covenant with God—and Numbers reminds you over and over again that the divine provision for them to do so is always ready at hand.