

## Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

### Numbers, The Wander Years: from Egypt to Sinai to Moab to Canaan

#### I. Introduction

- A. The name *Numbers* (Greek – *Arithmoi*, and Latin - *Numeri*) highlights two censuses (**Numbers 1, 26**). **Why a Greek name for a Hebrew book?** Greek became the main language of Judaism after Alexander the Great (332 BCE). This led to the need to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek (*Septuagint* – or *LXX*, 70 Jewish translators).
- B. Although the name *Numbers* is important organizationally, this draws attention away from what the book is really about...life in the wilderness, not life by the numbers. In the Hebrew Bible, the book's original name is *Bemidbar* or "In the wilderness." It could be argued the book should be called "Wandering:" a long, difficult journey (thus, Egypt to Sinai to Moab to Canaan) with God through an in-between place.
- C. Numbers has two parts: **Ch. 1-25** relevant to the Exodus generation (Moses), and **Ch. 26-36** applies to the next generation (Joshua).
1. Why 40 years to walk a short distance (150 miles, 5 miles a day = 30 days)? Because God wanted the rebellious older generation to die before God led the younger generation into Canaan.
  2. With the histories we've studied of God destroying entire groups of people and cities, why wait 40 years? Just instantly destroy the older rebellious generation.
    - a. Is this a "covenantal narrative positioning God being more patient and merciful to the Israelites than to "others?" Can divine patience be seen here as partiality? Or is the prolonged punishment a part of the formation of the Joshua generation?
- D. Connection to Palm Sunday - You might have noticed an anachronism. We studied the book of *Deuteronomy* before *Numbers*. There is intentionality here. *Numbers* allows us a look at the dynamics of authority and rebellion in the wilderness story, which realizes connection with issues around authority in Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (i.e. Palm Sunday).
1. However, we should give special attention to position these two stories without inviting *supersessionist* or hierarchical readings. To be plain, we will not hermeneutically situate *Numbers* to prove Jesus is the prophesied Messiah. Misusing the Hebrew Bible Christologically as messianic evidence works against justice narratives, and against scholarship that resists references to a messiah, or suffering servant, or a lamb being interpreted as a person, instead of a people.
    - a. The nation of Israel, not Jesus, is the *lamb* and/or *suffering servant* being referenced in **Ex. 12; Ps. 22, 69; Is. 41, 44, 49, 50, 52-53; Jer. 11**. When we place the book of *Numbers* alongside the Triumphal Entry of Jesus, we notice shared patterns rather than messianic predictions being fulfilled.
- E. (P) – Priestly source (formed later from the J-Jahwist, and E-Elohist sources shaped to support a priestly point of view) offers regulations (after exilic exposure to Babylonian culture) designed to establish distinct identity from other cultures.

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### II. Difficulties.

#### A. Priest led abortion / curse of infertility.

**Num. 5:11-15a, 16-22, 27-28** <sup>11</sup>The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>12</sup>“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If any man’s wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, <sup>13</sup>if a man has had intercourse with her but it is hidden from her husband, so that she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her since she was not caught in the act; <sup>14</sup>if a spirit of jealousy comes on him and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself, or if a spirit of jealousy comes on him and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself, <sup>15</sup>then the man shall bring his wife to the priest.

<sup>16</sup>“Then the priest shall bring her near and set her before the Lord; <sup>17</sup>the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. <sup>18</sup>The priest shall set the woman before the Lord, dishevel the woman’s hair, and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. In his own hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. <sup>19</sup>Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, ‘If no man has lain with you, if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while under your husband’s authority, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings the curse. <sup>20</sup>But if you have gone astray while under your husband’s authority, if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had intercourse with you,’ <sup>21</sup>—let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman—‘the Lord make you an execration and an oath among your people, **when the Lord makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge;** <sup>22</sup>now may this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and **make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!**’ And the woman shall say, ‘Amen. Amen.’

<sup>27</sup>When he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, **and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop**, and the woman shall become an execration among her people. <sup>28</sup>But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be immune and be able to conceive children.

1. There is no punishment if the man’s jealousy/accusation is invalid.
2. The accused woman has no voice or agency in this matter.
3. The womb is discharged (forced miscarriage) or “immune” to conceive (forced infertility).
4. This passage cannot stand alone in biblically proving “Pro-Choice.” Similarly, **Jeremiah 1** (which is poetry regarding divine purpose, not specific to biological life or reproductive ethics) cannot stand alone as biblically proving “Pro-Life.” The Bible does not speak with one voice about when life begins or if God is “Pro-Life” or “Pro-Choice.” Many scholars lean toward life beginning at breath, not conception (**Gen. 2:7** *ruach* breath – “Then the LORD God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being”).

#### B. The Israelites crave different food. God provides it. Then sends a plague to kill them for complaining.

**Num. 11:33-34** <sup>33</sup>But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague. <sup>34</sup>So that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah,<sup>[d]</sup> because there they buried the people who had the craving.

#### C. Don’t question God’s appointed human authority.

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1. **Num. 16** – Korah and his followers challenge Moses’ authority. The earth opens and swallows them alive, while fire consumes others.
  - a. Why it’s difficult: The story links dissent against leadership with terrifying divine violence, often used historically to silence questioning voices.

D. Keep Midianite virgins for yourselves.

**Num. 31:1-2a, 7, 14-15, 17-18** The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites; <sup>7</sup>They did battle against Midian, as the Lord had commanded Moses, and killed every (adult) male. <sup>14</sup>Moses became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war. <sup>15</sup>Moses said to them, “Have you allowed all the women to live?” <sup>17</sup>Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. <sup>18</sup>But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves.

1. If God doesn’t command Moses to commit genocide and then keep young virgin women as spoils of war for personal use...what’s at stake here?

### III. Demand Inerrancy or Resist Divine Brutality?

A. *Numbers* is Israel’s self-portrait, not a pure historical account.

1. *Numbers* retells the wilderness story to shape communal identity, theology, and memory rather than to record events with modern historical precision.

B. Moses authorship is questionable.

**Num. 12:3** – “Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.”

1. Would the “most humble man in the world” refer to himself in 3<sup>rd</sup> person (e.g., “the man Moses”)?
2. Why is this important? This helps to establish *Numbers* was not written as history was happening, but rather this is perhaps a re-writing of a story for narrative and rhetorical purposes.

C. **Num. 14 & Ex. 32; Num. 20 & Ex. 17** are “Double Narratives” written by different authors at different times.

D. **Num. 13:33** - The *Nephilim* – giants descended from “sons of god” having sex with human women. This is an example of mythic memory, not historicity. The *Nephilim* were supposedly destroyed during the Noahic flood. How can they be in the biblical text post-flood?

1. **Gen. 6** (J-Jahwist) and **Num. 13** (JE – or pre-Priestly) come from different sources?

E. Divine Animals.

1. **Num. 21**- the Israelites complain about their food and water. God then sends fiery, poisonous

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serpents (“seraphim”) as punishment to bite and kill them.

- a. Moses intercedes for the complaining Israelites (revealing a pattern of divine wrath followed by human intercession then divine relenting) and God instructs Moses to make a Bronze serpent that would heal those bitten. This conflicts w/ the golden calf story – why are we now creating a bronze idol? Why would God poison, then heal?
  - b. **Is. 6** – “seraphim” surround the throne. Are these fiery seraphim/serpents the poison of God?
  - c. Intertextually – Jesus becomes the “Bronze serpent” lifted on the cross to appease God’s wrath.
2. Balaam’s talking donkey (**Num. 22-24**) is a “genre clue” – a mythical narrative with a talking animal purposed to paint Israel as protected by God and immune to the words of foreign prophets.

F. What are our choices?

1. Demand the Bible is literal, inerrant?
2. Create two gods?
  - a. Meet Marcion of Sinope (2nd century CE) who struggled so deeply with the disparities of O.T. divine violence and the Jesus of the Gospels, he concluded these two testaments reveal two different Gods. However, the N.T. is not void of violence (e.g., Pauline slavery, Revelation’s destruction).

### IV. The Journey to Canaan and the Triumphal Entry (“Palm Sunday”).

A. Both are considered “processional” moments.

1. The procession to Canaan involves violence, genocide, conquest – imperial forms. Yet, the Triumphal Entry was a procession led by non-violent resistance to imperialism.
2. Canaan represents defining identity by eliminating and excluding others. However, Jesus envisions a community without ethnic or cultural boundaries.
3. The procession to Canaan is power through domination. Palm Sunday subverts power by presenting a king who reigns through humility, service, and love, not control.

### B. The World “IN FRONT” of the Text

Question: In the Mosaic procession from Egypt to Canaan, and in the procession of Jesus (the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem), we have two leaders, both with their “backs against the wall,” guiding people with a history and experience of oppression – which type of leadership will we follow?

**Closing:** The Aaronic blessing / benediction, **Num. 6:24-26**

“The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”