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 John Sturdy
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NUMBERS

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THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

The story of Numbers begins with a picture of the people of Israel gathered together in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Sinai peninsula, having not long before fled from Egypt under the leadership of Moses and his brother Aaron, and receiving there commands from their God. It ends forty years later, with the people still led by Moses, Aaron having recently died, close to the promised land of Canaan (the land later called Israel), on its eastern side. So the book starts and finishes at rather odd points. Furthermore its contents are not, as we might expect, a continuous story of what happened to the Israelites in this period, but particular stories of the beginning and end of the period, centring on the theme of grumbling and rebellion on the part of the people, answered with both punishment and forgiveness on the part of God. These stories are interspersed with a large number of laws and regulations given by God, and with two censuses of the people. It is in fact from these censuses, minor features though they are of the whole book, that it gets its name, Numbers, which it was first given in the Greek translation of the original Hebrew. The Hebrew name was 'in the wilderness', taken (as was usual) not very imaginatively from the first verse of the book; but it gives in fact a rather better description of what it is about. The book is not much of a unity. This is because it is one part of a longer work, which has been rather arbitrarily divided up into books.

THE LONGER WORK OF WHICH NUMBERS IS A PART

Numbers comes to us as the fourth of a group of five books, the first five books in the Bible. These are often known by

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The longer work of which Numbers is a part

the technical term the Pentateuch, or 'group of five', and in Judaism as the Law (Torah). This is one of the three great divisions of the Hebrew Bible (which is the Christian Old Testament). It was separated off as a group of 'holy books' earlier than the rest, some time between the fifth and the third centuries B.C. Numbers follows on well enough from the previous book, Leviticus, but does not lead into the next book, Deuteronomy, which reads like an intrusion in its present position. We have in fact to leap ahead to the last chapter of Deuteronomy to find the continuation of Numbers. So there has been a complicated development of the material. What is taken by most scholars to have happened is as follows.

The Pentateuch is the end-product of a development lasting over 600 years, in which the Israelites formulated and elaborated the story of their past. Deuteronomy, though not the last part to be written, is the last part to be added to the collection Genesis–Numbers, and to tie it in with this collection the story of the death of Moses (Deut. 34), which had originally come at the end of Genesis–Numbers, was transferred to the end of Deuteronomy, to form a rounded whole. The history of Genesis–Numbers is complicated. There are two main blocks of material in it, one early and one late.

The late material comes from a writer, or a group of writers of similar interests, probably from about 500–400 B.C.; that is, after the great turning-point in the history of the nation, the exile to Babylon in 586 B.C., which was accompanied by the end of the monarchy and of political independence. This writer, whose name is unknown, we call the Priestly Writer, or P for short. The name is given because his interests suggest strongly that he was a priest. He wrote a book which was designed to supplement rather than replace the earlier material then known; and after a time this was naturally enough united with the older material in one continuous story. Since the Priestly Writer had the clearer form, and was governed by a lucid and comprehensive chronological framework, his work was subsequently used as the basis of

How many older sources?

the story, into which the older material was placed as appropriate, some of it being lost. For much longer, however, the work of the Priestly Writer continued to be added to by later writers of the same school of thought, so that it holds together the thought of different writers, who are nevertheless in sympathy with one another.

The older material in Numbers comes from a good 500 years earlier. Very probably it reached a fixed form as a book in about the reign of David or of Solomon, which was a time of a great literary flowering in Israel (about 1000 to 930 B.C.). It rested on traditions going back a good deal earlier, which were passed down by word of mouth. In this process of oral tradition they were rounded off and reshaped to form stories that told well, and will often have reached a fixed form already before they were written down. The actual writing was done by a great writer and collector of traditions, who was concerned to build up a picture of the history of his nation which should also contain a theological lesson for his own day, a writer known today as the Yahwist, or J.

HOW MANY OLDER SOURCES?

This early material has traditionally been divided between two early sources, which have been called J and E. J uses Yahweh as the name of God from the beginning of Genesis, while E uses the word for God, *'elōhīm*, in Genesis, not introducing his name until Exodus. J comes from the southern kingdom (Judah), E from the north (Ephraim). The two differ slightly, it is claimed, in the choice of Hebrew words, and in the way they tell stories. They overlap substantially, however, in their content, and it has recently come to be seen that an essential further part of this theory is the view that both are built on a common outline of traditions formed in the period of the united monarchy, under David and Solomon, which passed into the keeping of both north and south when they split, developing different literary forms in the process.

The historical value of Numbers

Much the greater part of the older material is attributed to J; E, it is thought, survives only in smaller sections, which were incorporated into the fabric of J after the northern kingdom had fallen in 722 B.C.

It is not however necessary to assign passages between J and E in this commentary. On the traditional view E used 'elohim distinctively only up to Exod. 3: 15, when the name Yahweh is revealed to Moses, and thereafter the allocation of older passages between the two sources is highly uncertain. A detailed recent study of the older narratives in Num. 10–21 concluded that there was no trace of E in this section. There is furthermore a group of scholars who do not believe there was a separate source E at all, and think in terms of a single line of older tradition formed under David or Solomon, and passed down in the southern kingdom, which came to incorporate various individual traditions not assimilated to the older material, so giving rise to the inconsistencies on which the two-source theory leans for evidence. This is the view taken by the writer of this commentary. But in the light of the uncertainties in allocating material to E in Numbers among those who believe in an E source, it is in any case simply more sensible to write in terms of 'the older material' without attempting such an uncertain division of the text.

THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF NUMBERS

The period of the wandering in the wilderness is usually dated to about 1250 B.C. So there is a long interval before J writes down the traditions about this period 300 years later, and a much greater interval still before P writes his version of them perhaps 800 years after the event. It could not be expected that any traditions of value would survive to be incorporated into P which J had not taken up; and at many places P's version is clearly dependent on that of J, and the detail it has which was not in J is unhistorical.

It is harder to say how much historical value is to be given

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The historical value of Numbers

to the account in J. The biblical account of the exodus from Egypt and the entry into Palestine has seriously oversimplified a complicated picture. Not all the Israelites of later times in Palestine, even perhaps not many of them, had ancestors who had come out of Egypt; and those who came out of Egypt may well have done so in several small groups, rather than in one large group. One of these, perhaps a few hundreds in number, was led by Moses, a man whose name itself reveals him to be of Egyptian upbringing, if not descent. It is not however certain whether he led the group directly into Palestine, or as the tradition claims went on a journey to Sinai, standing somewhere in the Sinai peninsula, and there underwent an experience which he and the Israelites interpreted as a revelation by God of himself. The tradition goes on to tell how this was followed by a lengthy period of wandering in the wilderness, a time of repeated rebellion against God and of punishment for rebellion by failure to enter into Canaan as they had hoped. But the reliability of this part of the tradition is open to serious question. There are some signs that J originally had a tradition of moves to enter Palestine from the south, which in fact succeeded, as well as other traditions of an entry of the tribe of Benjamin from the east across the Jordan by way of Jericho. He has harmonized these with one another by making the tradition of entry from the south a story of a defeat; and then has to introduce into the tradition a lapse of time to allow the Israelites to move from south to east. He explains the defeat at Hormah as due to rebellion against God by the people. Only God's mercy gives them a second chance, and that comes after the death of all who wrongly murmured against God. If this interpretation is right, traditions of entry from both south and east for different groups underlie the story we find in Numbers, while the themes of the rebellion and the forty years in the wilderness are not based on historical recollection, but are theological reflection by J.

But whatever value we put on the evidence of Numbers for

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The historical value of Numbers

the period of the wilderness wanderings, both J and P provide important material for understanding the period at which they write in the stories they tell. In J the stress laid on the rebellion of the people and on God's forgiveness and guidance may well reflect the religious situation of his day. When David was expanding his empire he simply incorporated into Israel all the Canaanites, and we hear no more of them after his time. But this did not alter their fundamental religious loyalties, and Solomon and his successors governed a people containing a very substantial number who superficially conformed to the worship of Yahweh, but remained basically faithful to the Canaanite set of gods, to El, Baal and Asherah. It is this situation which underlies J's special concern with themes of rebellion, punishment and forgiveness. On the other hand the sense of achievement in the empire of David and Solomon, a pride in what Yahweh has made of Israel, comes out clearly in the oracles of Balaam, especially the final one, which looks forward to the building up of David's empire as the fulfilment of God's purposes for his own people.

In the work of the P writer too, although in a rather different way, we can see the interests of the writer's own date reflected. The nation is now much more introverted, and does not move on the stage of international history. So we find reflections in his work of arguments about whether the Korahites are to retain their position as one of the great guilds of temple-singers, and of discussion of the age at which the Levites should begin their service, which we can see in Numbers being lowered from thirty to twenty-five. But most characteristic of P is his picture of the nation as the great multitude united under God's leadership and following his law and will to the letter under its inspired leaders Moses and Aaron; and it is the degree of idealism in this picture which by contrast underlines for us the insignificant status and unsatisfactory religious devotion of the Judah of the Priestly Writer's day.

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Numbers as a theological work

NUMBERS AS A THEOLOGICAL WORK

What is really most important in any book of the Old Testament is the theological ideas, ideas about God and his relationship to the men he has created, which are to be seen in it. But these are not always easy to find. Numbers for instance is part of a larger whole, Genesis–Numbers, artificially separated off, and contains within itself the ideas of two quite separate schools of thought divided by 500 years or so in time (as far apart as Chaucer and Jane Austen). We cannot read straight through Numbers, jotting down ideas that we find, but need to attend separately to the ideas of J and those of P, both of which are parts of a larger whole.

J is the first writer in Israel to create a great historical epic of the origins of the nation, spanning time from the first days of creation and fall, through the promises to Israel's early ancestors the patriarchs, on to the exodus from Egypt, and through the times of trial in the wilderness to the entry into the promised land. There was something strikingly new in portraying a people's religious relationship to its God in terms of its history, of a continuous story that is told. The idea may have grown out of the feasts in the calendar, at which great events of the past were commemorated and realized anew in retelling, as was done for the exodus at the Passover, for creation very probably at Tabernacles, and for Sinai at the feast of Weeks. But these separate commemorations are now drawn together into a continuous story. Two constant theological ideas run through it, tied closely together: God's love for man, his concern to protect him and redeem him, if necessary through punishment, on the one hand, man's recurrent sinfulness and rebellion on the other. J looks to God's mercy as triumphing in the end. These themes do in fact come out most clearly in the wilderness stories in Numbers; so that far from being rather marginal in importance, this tradition contains within itself some of the most central

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concerns of J. It is because the writer is concerned with disobedience and rebellion as a religious problem of his own day that he sees it ranking so large in the period of the wilderness. This is part of a more general tendency to place in this period, as the archetypal period in the development of Israel, the origin of events and institutions found later. The calves idolatrously set up by King Jeroboam are in Exodus attributed to an act of idolatry by Aaron himself in setting up a Golden Calf; the origin of Nehushtan, a cult object in the form of a serpent in the temple in Jerusalem, is attributed to Moses; some hold that the very covenant made with Moses at Sinai is a projection into the wilderness period of a tradition of covenant that has its real roots in Israel itself. So the period in the wilderness is a time of the greatest significance for J, in which the outlines of the later behaviour of Israel and of the response of its God are already being marked out.

The Priestly Writer, in the period after the exile, retells the story told by J, at times presupposing it, at times reshaping it to indicate his own concerns. While the picture of disobedience and promise of redemption remains central, there is a new development of the greatest importance. For P the worship of the temple, the cult by which men are reconciled to God and atonement made, is of vital significance. It matters so much because he thinks of God himself as being in some sense present in the temple with his people, awesome and unapproachable, but dwelling with them. It is a sort of sacramental presence, for God is not contained within the temple: he remains in the heavens. But his 'glory', a visible realization of his nature, is in the temple. Again the writer is reflecting the beliefs of his own day, and projects them back into the wilderness in his picture of an ideal Israel moving in ordered ranks, with God's presence in the Tent, forerunner of the temple, unapproachable in their midst. A feeling of great awe and fear of God comes over in the work of P. This stress on God's presence and on the reconciling work of the cult also reflects the problem P faces in his own day, the

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indifference of many in Israel to the due forms of worship which matter so much to him.

Substantial additions are made in Numbers to the work of P, in a fundamentally similar style, but with a slant of their own. It is here that we find the censuses (the 'Numbers' from which the book gets its name), the detailed enumerations of the proper offerings at different feasts, the pattern of strange rituals like that of the ordeal or of the 'Red Cow'. These are in fact the parts of Numbers which modern readers find the most tedious, and the hardest to sympathize with. One might compare the kind of mind that now finds its satisfaction in the constant making of lists, or the collecting of engine or bus numbers. The reader who does not share this mentality might at least attempt by an act of sympathetic imagination to feel in this sort of writing too a quite genuine, if oddly expressed, passion for due reverence to God himself.

Lastly a later editor has put together the books of J and P, and in the process adjusted them to one another. This process is known technically as redaction, and so he is usually called the Redactor (or R). He uses P as his framework, for he feels no doubt about its authenticity, and so when the two overlap it is J material that is lost. The Redactor has no theological position of his own to impose on the material, but he implies that both accounts have a high standing in his day, so that it is his aim to fuse the two and preserve as much as he can of each. By this composition he makes a definitive version of the picture given us by J and P of God's people moving forward under his guidance in the wilderness, sinning and rebelling, and yet constantly reclaimed by God's chastisement and love, and reconciled with him to be the people he has chosen.

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Israel in the wilderness of Sinai

* The first nine chapters of Numbers are for most readers a rather forbidding start to the book. They come from the pen of P (the Priestly Writer; see pp. 2f.) writing after the exile, and they cover topics of great interest to him, an interest which in many cases modern readers find it hard to share. They show Israel still in camp beside Mount Sinai, after God has revealed his covenant to them through Moses (Exod. 19-34). They recount a census of the tribes (ch. 1), their arrangement in camp (ch. 2), a census of the Levites and an account of their duties (chs. 3-4), followed by a series of regulations of very mixed character including the form of trial by ordeal (ch. 5), rules about Nazirites (ch. 6), the offerings of the chiefs (ch. 7), and more material about the Levites (ch. 8). It will be realized as we go along that little if anything in these chapters is a true recollection of life in the wilderness. They are an idealizing reconstruction of it. Their interest must lie in what they tell us about the burning concerns of the Priestly school in the reconstruction of the life of Judah in their own day; and although these concerns are sometimes centred on matters that seem very remote from us, their importance consists in helping us to understand in detail the form of Jewish religion from which both Christianity and modern Jewish faith have come.

It is widely agreed that these chapters contain not only the work of P himself, but supplements added in by his school over a period probably of centuries. We shall not attempt to disentangle the possible layers, since there is very little agreement on this yet, but shall point out some instances where discrepancies between different parts of chs. 1-9 suggest different authors. *