



Numbers – Part 1

Genealogies

Genealogical lists found in the book of Numbers are similar to many other lists of dates and names found throughout the Hebrew Bible. The repeated inclusion of such genealogies indicates first and foremost that record-keeping was considered important. Not only do they rhetorically reinforce the narrative's reliability, but they also project a sense that everything happens according to divine plan. Although it is unlikely that these lists reflect precise, accurate accounts of genealogical history, it is likely that they were adapted from various forms of records compiled over time by ancient communities.

Gender and Violence in the Law

While some of Leviticus's purity concerns continue in the book of Numbers, there are also some laws found here that do not exist elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Numbers 5 contains one prominent example; a terrifying and violent description of a "test" supposedly used to determine if a woman had committed adultery (5:11-31). The ritual involves public shaming and physical trials. If she is found guilty, she is forced to lose her pregnancy and then return home with her husband.

This law's institutionalized misogyny is intimately related to patriarchal concerns about property and inheritance. There is no equivalent test to determine if a husband has been unfaithful. Even if a woman is found innocent after undergoing this test, her husband suffers no repercussions for his wrongful accusation.

We do not know whether this ritual was actually used in its ancient context. That may well have been the case. Alternatively, it has been suggested that the test may have served more so as a threat against potentially adulterous relationships. Whether this test was implemented or not, however, does not negate the disturbing reality of its presence in scripture or the role it has played in perpetuating and validating violence against women since.

Priestly Power

The majority of material found in the book of Numbers is likely from the Priestly source. This is especially true in chapters 1-10 and 25-36. Stories of disgruntled Israelites "murmuring" against their leaders in the wilderness begin in Exodus and continue to show up frequently in Numbers. This "murmuring" theme is used by all of the Pentateuch's different sources, albeit with each

doing so in their own unique way. The Yahwist source (J) typically recounts stories of Israelites murmuring when basic needs like food or water are on the line. Murmuring shows up for the Elohist (E) when the people debate whether Moses is a good leader. In the Priestly source (P), the people murmur most often about who gets to be a priest.

All of this raises the question: Why make obstinance so central to your entire community's narrative? One part of the answer may have to do with reinforcing trust and patience with God by emphasizing that "the Lord will provide." Another part of the answer likely has more to do with questions of power and authority.

Priests often wield a lot of power as characters in these wilderness narratives. This aspect of the narrative is not just about "who gets to talk to God," but also who gets to be a priest. In order to bolster their own perceived authority, Priestly sources likely portrayed themselves as God's chosen decision-makers on purpose.

As the people continue "murmuring" and critiquing priestly power, God gets angry and repeatedly punishes them in horrific ways. This pattern continues over and over again throughout the book of Numbers. The underlying question seems to be: Who is in charge? And what happens to you when you start questioning authority? The people of Israel are warned not to push their luck.