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Numbers

MARKED FOR BLESSING, PLAGUED BY SIN—*NUMBERS 11–24*

THIS BOOK, WHICH comes from the same Priestly tradition as Leviticus, takes its odd English title (*Arithmoi* in Greek) from the two great census accounts, the "numberings" of the twelve tribes of Israel (Num 1; 26), which open its two major sections. The first of these sections (Num 1–25) recounts the journeys and experience of the older generation that departed from Egypt and died in the wilderness by divine decree; the second (Num 26–36) treats the new generation that grew up in the wilderness and now (in the narrative present) prepares to enter the land of Canaan and realize YHWH's promise to the people. Thus, the storyline is one of geographical and generational transition, although that overall movement is obscured by the many rapid shifts between narrative segments, ritual prescriptions, journey reports, and instructions for moving the tabernacle. It is unlikely that this meandering book with no distinct plot line will inspire a major film or epic novel, as Genesis and Exodus have done. Indeed, since the nineteenth century, commentators have viewed Numbers as unstructured, even disorderly, a literary attic in which the ancients stored materials they could neither use nor bear to throw away.

If Numbers gives the impression of randomness, that may be apt for a book that treats thirty-nine years of wandering "in the wilderness," as the book is entitled in Hebrew (*Bemidbar*). Making good sense of Numbers takes work and patience with detail. Certain elements of patterning can be discerned, the most basic of them being the "alternating bands" of stories (on the one hand) and legal and ritual prescriptions (on the other) throughout the book.[1] Other, small-scale elements of patterning, such as parallelism, repetition, and chiasm (repetition in reverse order), give structure to individual passages.[2] All of these together suggest that the book has not been casually assembled.

The first large section (Num 1–25) focuses on two themes that are juxtaposed in considerable tension: divine blessing for the people Israel, and Israel's sin. These themes interact in contrapuntal fashion within the narratives of the generation that perished in the wilderness. In these chapters, YHWH's intention to bless the people descended from Abraham becomes prominent for the first time since the foundational stories in Genesis. While Leviticus mentions in passing that Moses and Aaron blessed the people (Lev 9:22–23), Numbers records the exact words that Aaron pronounced:

> *May YHWH bless you and keep you.*
> *May YHWH show the light of his face toward you and deal graciously with you.*
> *May YHWH lift his face toward you and grant you peace. (Num 6:24–26)*

Thanks to recent archaeological excavation, we now know something of how this benediction, still widely used in both Jewish and Christian liturgies, functioned during the biblical period. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, a burial cave in Jerusalem yielded two amulets, tiny silver scrolls engraved with the blessing, dating from the seventh century BCE. They show that already in the time of the first temple, the Priestly benediction did not belong solely to the province of priests. Wearing it as a pendant was apparently an element of personal spirituality; it may have been used for regular prayer, as in the much later Jewish practice of binding on *tefillin*, small boxes containing scrolls inscribed with biblical verses, for personal prayer. This Israelite practice may have been viewed as a literal realization of YHWH's charge to the newly consecrated high priest Aaron to "put my name upon the Israelites" (Num 6:27) by reciting the benediction over them. As we shall see, the theme of blessing for all Israel figures also in the strange story of Balaam, the seer hired by the king of Moab to curse Israel, near the end of this section (Num 22–24).

However, the chief theme of the first large section of the book is Israel's sin: four detailed narratives trace the steady spiritual deterioration of the older generation that came out of Egypt. In the two Testaments of the Christian Bible, Numbers and the letters of the apostle Paul are the richest sources of insight into the phenomenon of the religious failure of a whole people, in part through dangerous failures of leadership. Taken together, Numbers and the Pauline corpus offer a valuable corrective to the contemporary tendency to dwell exclusively on matters of personal (im)morality while ignoring the even more important issue of corporate sin. These several stories point to sins of ingratitude, doubt, and spiritual presumption, all of which are directed ultimately against God.

The Sin of Ingratitude

The first story of Israel's sin comes after ten chapters of preparation for the long march away from Mount Sinai (Num 10:33), which will culminate in their arrival at the eastern bank of the Jordan, directly across from Jericho (22:1). The period of preparation climaxes with the celebration of the first Passover in the wilderness (Num 9); Egypt is exactly one year in the past. These ten chapters end with a sublime moment, when we hear the liturgy that Moses will recite throughout Israel's travel: "Rise up, O YHWH, and may your enemies scatter" (10:35) each time the Israelites pick up the ark to set out, and "Return, O YHWH, O myriads of thousands of Israel" (10:36) each time they come to a resting place. These words are still used in the liturgy of the synagogue, whenever the Torah scroll is removed from the ark for reading and procession and then returned to it.

In the wilderness, the sublime quickly yields to the base. Just three days into the march, the people start "complaining fiercely in the ears of YHWH." In contrast to God's patience with Israel's complaints prior to Sinai and the sin of the golden calf, divine anger now strikes fast and hard: "the fire of YHWH"—lightning, flames, plague?—consumes the outskirts of the camp (11:1). The sudden outburst is memorialized in the name given to the place, *Tav'erah* ("Burning," 11:3). This is the first of the chapter's two **etiologies**, the naming accounts that form the opening and closing frames for the story of what happened at this place. The first name memorializes YHWH's fiery wrath; the second, *Kivrot ha-Ta'avah* ("Graves of Craving," 11:34), recalls the sin that provoked it.

The Bible gives repeated attention to the phenomenon of desire—whether well-ordered desire, the kind closely connected with wisdom (e.g., Prov 8:10–11), or destructive desire, the kind evident already in the garden of Eden. In the Israelite camp, craving spreads like a virus, starting with the unidentified "riffraff" (Num 11:4)—the discontented few? Soon, everyone is weeping for the fish and vegetables they claim to have eaten in Egypt "for free" (Num 11:4–5), as though forgetting the economics of slavery. The sin of ingratitude, born of false memory, leads also to misrepresentation of their present situation: "And now our throats are dry; there is nothing at all—nothing before our eyes except this manna!" (11:6). Lest the reader be taken in, the narrator immediately offers a culinary aside: manna is in fact rich and creamy; it can be prepared in various ways and does not even require rinsing, since the falling manna comes to rest on a layer of dew (11:7–9).

As whole families stand at their tent flaps, weeping in frustration, YHWH becomes "exceedingly enraged" (11:10). This in turn pushes Moses over the edge, and for the first time, he complains to God of his own mistreatment:

> Did *I* conceive this whole people, or did *I* birth them, that you should say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling," to the land that you promised to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to this whole people, when they weep to me, saying, "Give us meat so we can eat!" It is not possible for me all by myself to carry this whole people, for it is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to do me, then just go ahead and kill me, if I have found favor in your eyes, and let me not look upon my own wretchedness! (Num 11:12–15)

Although the people's complaint sparks only divine anger, Moses's protest elicits mostly positive results for them and for him. YHWH's response is complex, and the first part seems to have nothing to do with the complaint about food. Instead, YHWH brings up something that Moses has not proposed directly—namely, sharing the responsibility of leadership:

> YHWH said to Moses: "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to have ability as elders and foremen of the people, and take them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their place there with you. I shall come down and speak with you there, and I shall draw forth some of the spirit [*ruaḥ*] that is upon you and place it upon them, and they will bear with you the burden of the people, and you will not bear it all by yourself. And to the people you shall say, 'Purify yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat . . . for a whole month, until it comes out of your noses and becomes nauseating to you, because you rejected YHWH who is in your midst, and wept before him saying, "Why did we ever come out of Egypt?!"'" (Num 11:16–18, 20)

Because the connection between shared leadership and eating meat is not obvious, both scholars and lectionaries usually separate the two storylines that run through the rest of the chapter. Yet one key word marks the connection between the two: both sequences of events feature the *ruaḥ* ("wind, spirit") that comes from YHWH. First, YHWH distributes some of Moses's prophetic *ruaḥ* ("spirit") upon the seventy chosen elders gathered at the tent (11:24–25), with an overflow that reaches the initially unchosen Eldad and Medad, who start "acting-like-prophets in the camp" (11:27; see 11:26). Then, in the final scene, "wind" from YHWH dumps a mess of quail on and around the camp (11:31). While the meat is still in the people's mouths, YHWH's anger blazes against them, striking down many (11:33). The distribution of the prophetic spirit and the sending of quail are both manifestations of YHWH's power, twin revelations that constitute an answer to the rhetorical question YHWH has posed to doubting Moses: "Is YHWH's hand too short?" (11:23)—that is, Is there a limit to what YHWH can do? Yet the effects of the revelations seem to be diametrically opposed. The dissemination of the prophetic spirit serves to build the people up;

the quail-with-a-plague serves to reduce their numbers. How can YHWH be so inconsistent?

Viewed as revelations, these two visitations of divine *ruaḥ* in the wilderness can be seen as a mirror of the way God manifests power earlier in Moses's story, as recounted in Exodus. There, too, we find twin manifestations, one edifying and one punishing—first the revelation at the burning bush, which leads to Israel's salvation, and then the plague battle with Pharaoh, which ends in ruin for Egypt. Yet YHWH's aim in both cases is the same: to be *known*, recognized as uniquely powerful and authoritative by both peoples. The difference in outcomes lies in the character of the leaders and their capacity to know YHWH. For Moses, the manifestation in the bush is enough for him to reorient his life completely and yield to YHWH's will. For Pharaoh, by contrast, even the devastation of the plagues is not enough for him to acknowledge any power other than his own, long after all those around him, even his own courtiers, know that opposition to YHWH is futile (Exod 10:7). Similarly in Numbers, YHWH's aim is to be known by Israel, ideally through the words and actions of those filled with the prophetic spirit (cf. Num 12:6). Moses grasps this and welcomes the redistribution of some of his own *ruaḥ*: "If only all YHWH's people were prophets, that YHWH might put his spirit upon them!" (11:29). But as the story of grumbling and craving shows, not all can receive that manifestation of YHWH's *ruaḥ*. Those who cannot or will not know YHWH prophetically become susceptible to another form of *ruaḥ*, the kind that brings judgment and death—eventually, to the whole generation that came out of Egypt.

The Sin of Doubt

The sin of ingratitude points to the people's failure to acknowledge God's sustaining power in the wilderness. The second sin—that of doubt—is seen in their failure to trust in the divine promise that will open up their future in the land of Canaan. YHWH charges Moses to organize a reconnaissance mission:

> You send men so they can scout out the land of Canaan, which I am about to give to the Israelites; one man from each ancestral tribe you shall send, each a chieftain among them. (Num 13:2)

The chieftains are sent, not on a military mission, but on a public relations assignment. They are instructed specifically to bring back some of the fruits of the land (13:20), which should be enticing to those who have long been in the wilderness. Although they return with gigantic grapes, along with figs and pomegranates, the people fly into a panic at their "defamatory report" (13:32; cf. 14:36–37) of an intimidating land with equally intimidating inhabitants:

> "The land through which we passed to scout it is a land that consumes those who dwell in it, and the whole people whom we saw in it are of huge size. And there we saw the Nephilim . . . , and we seemed in our own eyes like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes." The whole community cried out loud, and the people wept that night. (13:32–14:1)

"Let's head back to Egypt!" (14:4), the people cry, and this time YHWH is ready to "disown" them and make of Moses another, greater nation (14:12)—as YHWH also threatened once before, at the crisis of the golden calf (cf. Exod 32:10). As before, Moses counters with an appeal concerning YHWH's reputation: "What will the nations say?" (Num 14:15–16; cf. Exod 32:12). Then, still looking back to that earlier exchange, Moses delivers the coup de grâce, citing YHWH's own self-proclamation at Sinai:

> And now, may the power of my Lord be magnified, just as you have said, "YHWH, slow to anger and great in covenant-faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and crime. . . ." (Num 14:17–18; cf. Exod 34:6–7)

It is a gutsy act of prophetic intervention, calling on YHWH to demonstrate power precisely in forbearance. YHWH's response is no less remarkable: "I pardon, according to your word" (Num 14:20).

As when Abraham pleaded for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18), Moses's intercession succeeds—up to a point. While agreeing not to give up altogether on the people, YHWH now makes a decree from which there is no turning back: the Israelites will spend forty years in the wilderness, one full year for each day that the reconnaissance party spent in the land concocting their dispiriting report. The scouts and everyone over the age of twenty will become corpses in the wilderness (Num 14:29). There is a deep irony to YHWH's decree, which echoes and inverts the people's complaint (cf. 14:2–3). The older generation will get the death in the wilderness for which they have (insincerely) wished, but their children will not become the feared war booty; instead, they will enter the land that their parents have despised (14:31).

The story of the reconnaissance mission is the great turning point for Israel's wilderness experience, and it has been the source of much theological reflection. The great nineteenth-century Hasidic rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotzk wonders why the emissaries were punished for their report. It is because, he explains, they did not confine their report to what they themselves experienced; they presumed to know how the giants saw them. Distracted thus, they lost sight of what YHWH envisioned for them; they chose the wrong set of eyes through which to view their experience and examine their own fears.[3]

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth offers a complementary insight when he treats the story of the scouts as a key biblical instance of sloth, of failure to rise to the high calling of God. Here in Numbers, the land represents the summons to live as a holy people, in a state of total responsiveness to the God who brought them out of Egypt (15:40–41). Sloth, traditionally one of the seven deadly sins, is the inverse of the sin of pride, the presumption to take God's place and "sit unhindered on his throne."[4] The slothful person "turns his back on God, rolling himself into a ball like a hedgehog with prickly spikes";[5] he is essentially turned inward by fear. Barth recognizes that in yielding to sloth, we become "practical atheist[s],"[6] granting supreme power to whatever causes anxiety. Thus, the scouts imagine the giants into a power greater than YHWH, and themselves into defenseless grasshoppers, and the people embrace that vision, more ready to die than to enter the land that YHWH has promised.

The biblical writers underscore the spiritual significance of the reconnaissance mission and its failure with a verbal echo that links this story to a particular ritual prescription in the next chapter about how Israel is to acknowledge the call to holiness. The link is the relatively rare verb *tur* ("scout"), which stands out even more because it is used just this once in a metaphorical sense, to convey the action of an unfaithful heart. The Israelites are instructed to make tassels of violet thread on the hems of their garments:

> And when you see it, you remember all YHWH's commandments and perform them—and you shall not *go scouting* after your own hearts and after your own eyes, after which you [are inclined to] go *whoring*, in order that you may remember, and perform all my commandments, and be holy to your God. (Num 15:39–40)

The fringe with the violet cord is a physical reminder of a commitment to fidelity, like a wedding ring. An even better modern analogy might be the purple shirt worn by some bishops. Purple was the color of social distinction in the ancient Mediterranean world, since the dye (extracted in tiny quantities from murex mussel shells) was outrageously expensive. Purple garments were worn chiefly by royalty and priests (cf. Exod 28:4–8). Moreover, reliefs from Assyrian palaces show that fringed garments were the distinctive dress of royalty.[7] The slender violet cord to be worn by ordinary Israelites was thus a token of their special status as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). Archaeological evidence from the land of Israel indicates that this prescription was indeed fulfilled; the violet twist has been found among remnants of clothing in caves occupied by Jewish men involved in the Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome in 132–135 CE.[8]

This prescription pairs the metaphor of scouting with a second metaphor for apostasy—whoring (Num 15:39)—and this, too, is an echo of the reconnaissance account. It is the "whoring" of the older generation that provokes YHWH's decree that the Israelites will spend forty years in the wilderness (14:33; cf. 25:1). Further, the sexual metaphor echoes God's warning after the golden calf, that in the land of Canaan the people will be tempted to "whore after" local deities (Exod 34:15–16). Thus, the double metaphor evokes a storyline from Egypt to Sinai to Canaan; the simple sign of a purple tassel triggers memories of YHWH's long faithfulness and calls for a reciprocal commitment from any and every Israelite. But the reality is not simple. In the pattern of alternating bands of ritual and narrative material in Numbers, YHWH's command to Israel to be holy receives its first, vexed response in the narrative that immediately follows.

The Sin of Presumption

Tracing the pattern of mounting sins, the failure by the scouts and the people to trust in the promised future is succeeded by the sin of religious presumption. It takes the form of an accusation directed against Moses and Aaron by their cousin Korah and a group of community leaders:

> You are going too far! For the whole community, all of them are holy, and YHWH is in their midst. And why should you set yourselves up over YHWH's congregation? (Num 16:3)

Korah son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi (16:1)—the unusual four-generation genealogy marks him as a rebel with a pedigree, not one of the "riffraff" in Israel's midst (11:4). Moreover, Korah is joined by other prominent leaders: the descendants of Reuben, the firstborn son of Jacob, and 250 others, "called [as representatives in] the tribal assembly, men of renown" (16:1–2).

Their claim is initially plausible, in light of the immediately preceding divine charge to all Israelites to "be holy to your God" (15:40; cf. Lev 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:6). Maybe that is why Moses does not give a direct answer but leaves the matter to God:

> In the morning, YHWH will make known who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will *bring* [*them*] *near* to himself; whomever he has chosen, he will bring-near to himself. (Num 16:5)

The verb "bring-near" (*q-r-b* Hiphil) has a cultic connotation; in the Priestly tradition, it often expresses the essential dynamic of sacrificial worship, when someone

brings an offering near to YHWH (e.g., Lev 3:1, 3, 7, 12, etc.; Num 16:17). Here, however, Moses places emphasis on God's prior initiative: YHWH has already "brought-near"—granted access to—the leaders, empowering them for service in the sanctuary and for ministry. "And," Moses asks the group incredulously,

> . . . you would seek priesthood also? Therefore it is against YHWH that you and all your assembly are assembled. (Num 16:10–11)

This story, which appears to be a composite account of several rebellions,[9] makes a crucial point about the destructiveness of spiritual pride, especially as it manifests itself among the community's leaders. Exodus and Leviticus represent YHWH's presence as a high-voltage zone, which calls for extreme caution. Although Korah affirms with his words that YHWH is in Israel's midst (16:3), he mistakenly views that as a reason for seeking to advance his own cause, with disastrous results for himself and others. The story of Korah and his large company of followers suggests that pride, the presumption of inherent holiness, is a danger to which "seriously" religious people are especially prone. This story signals that the status of holiness is contingent, not fixed. It depends at every moment on YHWH's free choice to "bring [the people] near," granting them access to the near presence of the Divine.

In the anatomy of sin provided by the narratives in Numbers, the most disturbing instance of religious presumption is that of Moses and Aaron. By far the most poignant and perplexing of the moral failures recounted here, this is the sin that accounts for their own deaths short of entering the land of Canaan. The event takes place in the parched wilderness of Zin in the Negev, where the people contend with Moses, repeating their by-now-familiar wish that they had died, or that he had never "made [them] leave Egypt" in the first place (20:3–5). Again, Moses and Aaron refrain from giving an immediate answer; they withdraw to the tent of meeting and prostrate themselves in prayer. YHWH's "glory" (20:6), or palpable presence, appears with this instruction for Moses:

> Take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes and it will yield its waters; and you bring forth for them water from the rock and give drink to the assembly and their beasts. (Num 20:8)

Moses takes the staff, "just as [YHWH] had commanded" (20:9), but when they stand before the rock, something goes badly wrong:

> Moses and Aaron convened the congregation before the face of the rock, and he said to them, "Listen here, you rebels: from this rock shall we bring forth water for you?" And Moses raised high his hand and struck the rock with the staff twice, and water came forth in abundance, and the assembly drank, and their beasts. But YHWH said to Moses and to Aaron, "*Because you did not show faith* [ʾ-*m-n* Hiphil] *in me, to affirm my holiness in the eyes of the Israelites*, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land that I have given them." (Num 20:10–12)

What brings on this dramatic reversal in YHWH's intention for Moses? Although no explanation is given here, there are two literary clues—one internal to Numbers, and the other an intertextual clue. The internal clue appears a few chapters earlier, when the Israelites themselves fail to "show faith" in response to the scouts' report and YHWH is ready to wipe them out and begin again with another people (14:11–12). Now it seems that Moses and Aaron have committed the same offense of failing to show confidence in God's power, with the same result: they will not enter the land of promise.

The external clue to Moses's offense comes from the psalmist, who recalls the incident thus:

> *[The Israelites] provoked anger at the waters of Meribah,*
> *and it went badly for Moses on their account.*
> *For they embittered his spirit,*
> *and he spoke rashly with his lips. (Ps 106:32–33)*

The problem lies in what Moses said. The twelfth-century rabbinic commentator Joseph ben Isaac of Orleans sums it up succinctly: "The sin resulted from saying *notsi*, 'shall *we* draw forth', and they should have said *yotsi*, 'shall *He* draw forth.'"[10] It was a small slip of the tongue—just one letter away from the truth, in Hebrew as in English. YHWH had instructed Moses to bring forth water, but in that moment Moses lacked the wisdom to "magnify the power of God," as he had always been careful to do in the past (cf. Num 14:17). With one word, Moses arrogated that power to himself and his brother. Still, is that momentary slip sufficient warrant for barring Moses and Aaron from entering the land? Is the divine ego so sensitive? Harsh though it is, their exclusion should be seen, not as an expression of God's vindictiveness, but rather as an act of protection for the people, protection against the idolatrous illusion that everything might depend on Moses and Aaron. This is the "true pathos" of the story, that "Israel's teacher is condemned for revealing the very failing that he tried to rectify in those charged to his care."[11]

To underscore that YHWH's holiness is the key issue here, the narrator names first and last the location of this event: Kadesh (20:1, 14), whose root meaning is "holy." Here, YHWH "was manifested as holy" among the people (20:13). It is

intriguing to ask whether this memorable story might underlie the opening words of the prayer that Jesus taught his followers: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matt 6:9; cf. Luke 11:2). All who offer that prayer commit themselves to transparency about God's mercy and power of deliverance, that God's works may be visible in and behind their own.

Divine Blessing

The penultimate divine word in this first long section of Numbers is extravagant blessing, pronounced through Balaam, the foreign seer turned prophet of YHWH. An Iron Age (eighth century BCE) inscription from a non-Israelite temple in Deir 'Alla in Jordan indicates that Balaam was a legendary seer whose reputation may have been widespread in the countries bordering Israel.[12] Several features of the "Book of Balaam," as these chapters are known in rabbinic tradition, suggest that it is an independent composition that was inserted into Numbers. Moses is never mentioned, and Balak, king of Moab, though prominent here, does not appear elsewhere in Numbers. Balaam and his ass travel on a road that passes vineyards (Num 22:24), quite unlike the desert setting of the rest of the book. The most incongruous feature is the ultimately positive characterization of Balaam here, which contrasts starkly with the later report that he seduced Israel to apostasy (31:16). Yet even if the insertion does not quite fit the larger narrative, its inclusion is not arbitrary. The Book of Balaam forms a concluding frame of blessing that complements the highly priestly blessing of shalom—peace, prosperity—that Aaron has extended to the people (6:22–27). Further, it provides "a crescendo of hope"[13] just before the grisly ending of the first section of the book, when the plague sent as a punishment for apostasy wipes out 24,000 Israelites (25:9), the remainder of those who came out of Egypt (26:1–2, 63–65).

There is a jarring contrast between thousands of Israelites struck down for apostasy and Balaam's vision of their countless numbers, in due course, "dying the death of the upright" (23:10). David Stubbs proposes that Balaam's words are to be understood eschatologically, "descriptions of who Israel is called to be and will be, but is not yet."[14] In short, this is genuine prophetic vision, from a seer who repudiates augury and divination practices (23:23; 24:1) in favor of "hearing God's speech" and receiving visions through the spirit of God (24:2, 4). Balaam looks upon a people whose current behavior is shameful and whose immediate prospects are grim, and he envisions something that is "not now" and "not soon" (24:17), "in days to come" (24:14). The last phrase is characteristic of prophetic discourse; it resonates with Isaiah (Isa 2:2) and Micah (Mic 4:1), who similarly look beyond the unpromising present to a future of great hope. Balaam's words point also toward fulfillment of the blessing to Abraham and Jacob, now many generations in the past:

> Those who bless you are each blessed; and those who curse you are each cursed. (Num 24:9; cf. Gen 12:3; 27:29)

The surprising, even shocking thing is that this sweeping blessing is not pronounced by Moses or Aaron but by a foreigner. The people and their leaders, even Moses and Aaron, have failed to show confidence that YHWH's promise will be fulfilled. Nonetheless, the divine intention to bless Israel abides. This is what Balaam affirms to Balak, the king who has tried to hire him to curse Israel, when he poses the rhetorical question, "Could it be that he has promised and will not act, or that he has spoken and will not make it happen?" (Num 23:19). The answer, of course, is no. Even if the realization of God's stated intention is "not now," it has already proved powerful enough to transform a mercenary non-Israelite seer—whose ass is more alert to the Divine than he is—into a bold proclaimer of YHWH's word of blessing.[15] Divine faithfulness ultimately trumps human ingratitude, doubt, and spiritual presumption, the forms of faithlessness set forth in the narratives of Numbers.

Notes

1. On "alternating bands" and the formal structure of Numbers, see Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 43–57.
2. For detailed discussions of patterns in Numbers, see Jacob Milgrom's magisterial work, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990); and Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993). A less technical treatment is offered by Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1996).
3. See Daniel Greyber, *Faith Unravels: A Rabbi's Struggle with Grief and God* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2012), 101.
4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 405.
5. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 405.
6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 470.
7. Stephen L. Cook, *Reading Deuteronomy: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2015), 165.
8. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004), 761.
9. On the fusion of four separate rebellions into a single story, see Milgrom, *Numbers*, 129.
10. Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor of Orleans, cited by Milgrom, *Numbers*, 451. Milgrom offers a careful discussion in support of this interpretation, supported by a strong line of rabbinic commentary as well as a discussion of alternative views.

11. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 456.
12. For details on the Deir 'Alla inscription, see Milgrom, *Numbers*, 473–76.
13. Olson, *Numbers*, 140.
14. David L. Stubbs, *Numbers*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 192.
15. Among recent treatments of the story of Balaam and the ass, R.W.L. Moberly's are especially insightful: *Prophecy and Discernment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 138–49; and *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 132–34.

SLOWING DOWN FOR VIOLENCE—*NUMBERS 5 AND 25*

NUMBERS IS NOT the first place in the Bible that the volatile combination of sex and violence comes to the fore, but here it is impossible to ignore, especially in two lengthy passages: the judgment of a woman suspected of adultery (Num 5:11–31) and the execution of a couple who have sexual intercourse at the tent of meeting (Num 25). The first instinct of many readers may be to move quickly past passages that seem to manifest a primitive and dangerous obsession with sexual morality that has nothing to do with genuine religion. I recommend the opposite approach: slowing down over violent texts to consider what kind of critical and specifically theological response is appropriate. The violent language and imagery prevalent in biblical texts should slow us down, because it is not casual. In contrast to much of the violence found in modern films especially, violence in the Bible is rarely if ever meant to be "entertaining." Pornography may use violence to shock and titillate, but these carefully composed biblical texts seem calculated to disturb in ways that may prove edifying, if read with care and wisdom. Film images of violence may flash across the screen in a bewildering succession, but biblical images of violence require patient probing if we are to comprehend their surprisingly subtle signals of dangers prevalent in the community of faith and our life with God.

The most important point to be explored is how the language of these two passages echoes that of other texts that have clear theological import. Such resonance points beyond a literal interpretation of the violent passages and may indeed run counter to it. Distinguishing between literal and symbolic language is often uncertain work that requires careful judgment, and it is a key element of critical theological interpretation. These passages in Numbers are important test cases for considering how the Bible uses highly charged images of sexuality, not

to titillate, but to arrest attention and direct it to sensitive consideration of moral matters.

"Going Astray"

The ritual prescription in Numbers 5 for a woman suspected of "going astray" is unique in the Bible, the only instance where a person accused of a capital offense is to be tried through ordeal, and in the sanctuary rather than in a legal assembly. It ostensibly concerns a domestic matter, a man's jealous action when he suspects his wife of adultery:

> Any man at all whose wife might have gone astray and committed an offense [*ma'al*] against him, in that a man has laid her, with emission of seed, and it is concealed from the eyes of her husband, and she keeps secret that she has made herself ritually-impure [*tamei*], and there is no witness against her, and she is not caught—but there comes upon him a spirit of jealousy [*qin'ah*], and he is jealous for his wife, and she has made herself impure; or there comes upon him a spirit of jealousy, and he is jealous for his wife, but she has not made herself impure—then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. (Num 5:12–15)

The language is direct: a man imagines, rightly or wrongly, that another man has "laid" his wife. As distinct from the normal phrase, to "lie *with*" someone, this cruder formulation implies an act of sexual intercourse viewed as illicit (cf. Gen 34:2, 5). The ritual prescribed is elaborate and humiliating: her hair is to be loosened—a sign of shame[1]? sexual availability?—and she is to be put under oath before drinking "the bitter waters that bring on a curse" (Num 5:18). If she is guilty, her belly will swell and her "thigh" (sometimes a circumlocution for genitals) will drop (5:22, 27). It is not clear exactly what is envisioned here—the disclosure of a hidden pregnancy, perhaps, or a miscarriage, or injury to her reproductive organs.

There is a vast literature on this passage among both Jews and Christians. From ancient times to the present, it has generally been used to reinforce the importance of marital fidelity. In Jewish tradition, the passage is influential enough to have a distinctive Hebrew title, *Sotah* ("Female-who-goes-astray"), and even to have generated a tractate of the **Mishnah**, which treats this and other rituals involving the recitation of words. Nevertheless, there is no record, biblical or otherwise, of this procedure ever having been carried out.[2] Already in the first century, the prominent rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai forbade it—specifically, for its failure to discourage the proliferation of *male* adulterers (Mishnah Sotah 9:9)!

Several recent commentators have suggested that the aim of the procedure was to offer a more humane alternative to the death penalty for suspected adultery, the norm in Israel (cf. Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22) and the ancient world. The woman here is not to drink poison but only a mixture of water, ink, and dust from the sanctuary floor (Num 5:17, 23). The priest is not to pronounce judgment; rather, the final statement is inconclusive—"and that woman shall bear her iniquity" (5:31). In the Priestly writings, that phrasing indicates punishment to be expected from God, not humans.[3] Jack Sasson suggests an association with the passage in Luke (Luke 7:36–50) where a woman wipes Jesus's feet with her loosened hair and is forgiven her (presumably sexual) sins: perhaps Luke was, on the basis of Numbers 5, "offering evidence to strengthen Christ's claim as ultimate judge."[4]

Yet it is questionable whether the case concerns domestic adultery at all. Its central subject is an aspect of the main theme of Israel's Scriptures: the imperative for faithfulness in the relationship between YHWH and Israel, which is by nature passionate and exclusive. Israel is frequently conceived as a marital partner in relation to YHWH, especially in prophetic poetry (e.g., Jer 3:1–13; Ezek 16; 23; Hos 2:4–25 Heb., 2:2–23 Eng.) that dates from the same centuries when the Priestly writings were being composed (c. 750–550 BCE). Multiple literary markers indicate that the passage may be an elaborate and disturbing metaphorical depiction of YHWH's suspicion that Israel has "gone astray":

- *Absence of a legal judgment or penalty.* Although legal texts normally specify the penalty for conviction, here it is implied that even if the woman is guilty, she will not be executed but will live on, as "a curse in the midst of her people" (Num 5:27). If she is exonerated, conception of a child can be expected (5:28). Narratively speaking, then, she is to be left before God, poised between curse and blessing, with neither human judge nor human witnesses to condemn her.
- *Language with theological rather than legal connotations.* The passage does not include the word for adultery (*na'af*), which is elsewhere prominent in legal prescriptions concerning adultery. Rather, the ritual is repeatedly described in terms that belong to the distinctly theological lexicon of the Bible. The language of "offense" (*ma'al*, Num 5:12) appears elsewhere in Numbers in reference to idolatry (31:16). Here it entails "matters of jealousy" (*qena'ot*, 5:15, 18, 25, 29; cf. 5:14, 30), a word most often used with reference to YHWH, who is designated *El Qanna'*, "Jealous [or: Passionate] God" (Exod 20:5). The offering is called "an offering for remembrance [*zikaron*], an offering of jealousy" (Num 5:15, 18). The root *z-k-r* frequently refers to remembering YHWH's teachings (Num 15:39–40) and actions (Ps 77:12 Heb., 77:11 Eng.), or remembering sin (Deut 9:7; Ezek 16:61, 63, etc.). Further, the woman is suspected of being

tamei, "ritually-impure" (Num 5:13, 14, 27, 28), the standard Priestly term for a condition fundamentally incompatible with being in the presence of the Divine.

- *Nature of the trial.* Although such an ordeal appears nowhere else in biblical case law, the woman's being forced to drink a potion (water, ink, and dust) may be compared to the idolatrous Israelites' being forced by Moses to drink water mixed with the dust of the golden calf (Exod 32:20). Several prophets use the poetic metaphor of YHWH forcing disobedient Jerusalem to drink a cup of wrath, reeling, or judgment (Isa 51:17, 22; Ezek 23:32; cf. Rev 16:19, of "Babylon," a.k.a. Rome). Jeremiah envisions the people being forced to drink poisoned water (Jer 8:14; 9:14 Heb., 9:15 Eng.), and further, becoming a curse (*alah*) among the nations (29:18; 42:18; cf. 24:9; 29:22)—just as the woman forced to drink the potion, if she is guilty, will become "a curse [*alah*] in the midst of her people" (Num 5:27).
- *Literary context.* The passage appears within a set of ritual instructions (Num 5–6) concerning situations that create a rift between YHWH, who "dwells in the midst" of Israel (5:3), and an individual. This is the longest and by far the most memorable part of that series of instructions. The individual may have accidentally become ritually impure (*tamei*, 5:1–4; 6:1–12) or committed a moral offense, such as telling a lie under oath (5:5–9).[5] The account of the *sotah* is the only instance in the series that mentions both ritual impurity and moral offense. The double descriptor marks this as a maximally volatile situation that demands resolution, if YHWH's immanent presence is not to endanger Israel.
- *Absence of family law in Numbers.* Apart from the questionable instance here, the book gives only slight attention to legal matters concerning women—treating inheritance (Num 27:1–11; 36:1–12) and vows (30:4–17 Heb., 30:3–16 Eng.)—and it makes no attempt to regulate family relations and sexual behavior (contrast Lev 18:6–23; 20:1–21).
- *Point of view.* The passage unfolds from the husband's perspective; it registers his emotions, should he suspect that his wife has been unfaithful. In a text that works chiefly at the literal level, this might reflect social reality, since ancient Israel did not restrict males to one legal sexual partner. However, with so many other features pointing to a metaphorical and theological interpretation, the point of view here might well be seen as that of the divine Spouse, YHWH, whose perspective is predominant throughout Numbers and in all texts that come from the Priestly tradition.

Thus, a careful reading of the passage suggests that it may be an extended metaphor that speaks of the whole people Israel in relation to God. Like rabbinic

midrashim and New Testament parables, it uses a startling narrative to prompt drastically new thinking—that is, repentance. In this way, it aligns with graphic prophetic passages in which the marriage metaphor depicts both the threatening intensity of divine passion and the rich possibility of divine forbearance. Here, the "woman" is released from "standing before YHWH" (Num 5:18, 30), with the possibility of living a pure life and bearing children, the sign of divine blessing.

I read the text as a metaphor, yet the question remains, How safe is it? Even if the woman stands for Israel, we see "her" subjected to a humiliating ritual, simply on the suspicion of unfaithfulness. Critique of metaphor is part of the work of critical biblical interpretation, and the metaphor of the woman suspected of adultery should be recognized as potentially dangerous. Inspired at least indirectly by this text, the medieval church used the practice of ordeal to uncover "secret sins," both moral (adultery) and theological (heresy).[6] At both the literal and the figurative level, we must read with an awareness that religious systems and the texts they endorse can and do cause harm, and often it is women who bear the brunt of that harm.

Within the book of Numbers, this parable serves to foreshadow a second narrative about sex and the sanctuary, about jealousy and violence, both human and divine—one that also seems to point to Israel and its relationship with YHWH.

Forbidden "Coupling"

> *Israel stayed at Shittim, and the people began to go whoring to the daughters of Moab, and they invited the people to the sacrifices for their god; the people ate and bowed down to their god. Israel attached itself to Baal Peor ["Lord of (Mount) Peor"], and the anger of YHWH raged against Israel.*
> (*Num 25:1–3*)

Whoring is a frequent metaphor in this book and the Priestly tradition as a whole for Israel's rank faithlessness (e.g., Lev 17:7; Num 14:33; 15:39). However, this particular event, with its deadly consequences, serves in Israel's Scriptures as the paradigmatic instance of Israel's infidelity to YHWH, never to be forgotten. Many years later, after Israel has taken possession of the land of Canaan, Joshua reminds the Israelites of this terrible failing, as a sharp warning against committing any further offense (*ma'al*): "Is the iniquity of Peor a small thing to us—from which we are not ritually-pure even to this day?" (Josh 22:17; other references to the incident appear in Deut 4:3; Ps 106:28; Hos 9:10).

As in all narrative exegesis, the question of *placement* is crucial for determining meaning: How does a given passage figure in a larger narrative sequence or a book? The story in Numbers 25 occurs at a key juncture. It comes just after

Balaam has pronounced a glorious blessing over Israel, camped in the borderlands of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho (22:1); this incident makes clear how far from realization is the seer's future-oriented blessing. And it comes just before the second census (Num 26) and indeed motivates it. The plague that YHWH sends as punishment for Israel's treachery finishes off the old generation, now demonstrably unworthy to enter the land.

Immediately, the story focuses our attention on one related instance of forbidden attachment, or "coupling":

> At that moment one of the Israelite men came and brought-near to his kin a certain Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole assembly of Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw. And he got up in the middle of the assembly and took his spear in his hand, and he went after the Israelite man into the chamber and pierced through the two of them, the Israelite man and the woman—into her "chamber"—and the plague against the Israelites was arrested. Those who died in the plague were 24,000. (Num 25:6–9)

The genealogy attached to Phinehas's name reminds us that the protagonist is a man at the top of the priestly aristocracy—Aaron's eldest grandson (cf. Exod 6:25), son of the current high priest. A moment later, YHWH charges Moses concerning Phinehas's own priestly role:

> Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites through his own jealousy for my jealousy [or: his own zeal for my jealousy] among them, so I did not finish off the Israelites in my jealousy. Therefore say, "I am now giving to him my covenant of friendship [or: peace], and it shall be for him and for his seed after him a covenant of priesthood forever, since he was jealous for his God and effected purgation [or: atonement] for the Israelites." The name of the man [of] Israel who was struck down—that is, struck down with the Midianite woman—was Zimri son of Salu, a clan leader of an ancestral house belonging to the tribe of Simeon. And the name of the woman who was struck down, the Midianite, was Kozbi, daughter of Zur; he was tribal head of an ancestral house in Midian. (Num 25:11–15)

Those who know the history of the priesthood will likely recognize here an **etiology** explaining the special privilege granted to this particular priestly line. Known as the Zadokites—after Zadok, one of Aaron's descendants (1 Chr 5:38

Heb., 6:12 Eng.)—they were the only group that enjoyed the right to preside over sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple.[7] Thus, the story may give some insight into the religious politics of ancient Israel; if anyone tried to challenge the power of the Zadokites, the answer could be this account of the origin of their privilege, a "covenant of friendship" conferred through Moses himself. However, the story goes beyond that political purpose in order to treat a more serious and difficult topic—namely, divine jealousy.

As with the account of the *sotah*, several words in this story point beyond a literal reading to a theological one:

"Brought-near." He "brought-near to his kin a certain Midianite woman" (Num 25:6). In Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the verbal root *q-r-b* appears frequently to describe the act of bringing an offering into the immediate presence of YHWH; a general term for the offering itself is *qorban,* a "thing brought-near" (e.g., Num 6:14; 7:13; 31:50). So now an Israelite man is bringing-near a Midianite woman, with a crowd of his kinfolk gathered at the tent of meeting. They are weeping—an act of penitence in response to YHWH's rage over the Baal Peor incident and Moses's charge to the leaders to slay the guilty among their own men.

"Chamber." Phinehas follows the two of them "into the chamber [*qubbah*]" and spears them through, all the way "into her chamber [*qovatah*]" (Num 25:8). The nature of the first "chamber" is not clear; the word *qubbah* was used among pre-Islamic Arab tribes to designate a tent used for divination. Perhaps some part of the tabernacle is intended, or perhaps another structure set up nearby; Milgrom suggests a wedding canopy set up in the sacred precincts, intended for ritual intercourse.[8] In either case, it is a risky choice for a sexual encounter, "in the sight of Moses" (25:6). The play on two very similar words—"the chamber" and "her cavity/chamber" might be designed to raise a question in the minds of those attuned to the associative kind of thinking characteristic of the Priestly tradition: How is the woman like the sacred space? Answer: Both have an inner chamber.

Kozbi. Perhaps the most resonant word in the story is the woman's name: Kozbi. In the Eastern Semitic language Akkadian, the related root means "luxuriant" or "voluptuous"; it was commonly a component of female names.[9] However, in Hebrew, the root letters *k-z-b* mean something altogether different, and sinister; this is the common word for "deception."

Zimri. Zimri's name comes from a common Hebrew root (*z-m-r*) that appears in several homonyms with very different meanings—"strength," "song," or

"pruning"—an interesting name for a young aristocrat, the son of a chieftain (Num 25:14), who is cut down with a spear.

Drawing on these several resonances, and listening for the kinds of associations that underlie Priestly theology, we might retell the story thus:

> Israel went whoring after the daughters of Moab. They were a sacred assembly, with YHWH camped in their midst, yet they coupled themselves with Baal Peor. What is this like? It is as though a prince of Israel brought a Midianite princess, a worshiper of foreign gods, into the near presence of YHWH—and coupled with her there in front of Moses and everybody! YHWH was intensely hurt, jealous, and passionately angry; all of Israel was in the greatest danger. What saved the people was the action of a priest, grandson of Aaron himself, who felt something of YHWH's own jealousy and passion for Israel. As for their names, she is Deception, and he was Strength—until Phinehas turned his spear into a pruning-hook! (cf. Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3)

The psalmist has a different way of retelling the story of the Israelites' faithlessness:

> *And they yoked themselves to Baal Peor, and they ate sacrifices of the dead.*
> *And they aroused anger by their misdeeds, and plague broke out against them.*
> *And Phinehas stood up and* interceded-with-prayer, *and the plague was arrested.*
> *And* it was accounted to him as righteousness, *to generation after generation, forever. (Ps 106:28–31)*

In this version of the story, Phinehas has dropped his spear and become a prayer warrior. By means of two strategic echoes of Genesis, the poet makes him a second Abraham: he intercedes with prayer (Gen 20:7; cf. Gen 18), and this is accounted to him as righteousness, as was Abraham's trust in God (Gen 15:6).[10] Is this way of telling the story a whitewash job, or is the psalmist doing a kind of translation of the story of Zimri and Kozbi, bringing its essential message into the life of the ordinary pray-er? The righteous person—whether one of those towering figures from the past, Abraham and Phinehas, or anyone who might pray the psalm—is the one who can sense what God feels and, in the very worst moment, intercede and rescue the relationship between God and Israel. For the psalmist, prayer is a penetrating spear.

Dangerous Reading

These two texts, which are generally read literally and judged to be pornographic in their violence against women, are better seen as metaphorical or symbolic representations of the relationship between YHWH and Israel, with particular focus on the intensity of divine jealousy. Such a reading makes the fullest sense of the "hard data," the particular words of the two texts. In each case, that argument has been advanced here through intertextual method, reading the first text in light of others that use similar words and images, and the second in conjunction with Psalm 106, which gives its own version of the incident.

Treating these two passages thus does not imply that there are no literal representations of violence against women in Numbers (see, e.g., Num 31:13–18), nor that every disturbing text can and should be subjected to a symbolic reading. Further, reading these two passages as symbolic representations of Israel's situation vis-à-vis God does not render them innocuous. Metaphors are related to social reality in complex ways. A symbolic representation of Israel as a woman humiliated by her husband was meaningful to an Israelite audience only because such a scenario would have been imaginable. Similarly imaginable would have been the story of a priest saving Israel by running a foreign woman and her Israelite lover or husband through with a spear—even if those figures were meant to be representative of their nations, rather than individuals. Moreover, violent symbols and stories can generate and legitimate real violence. As 1 Maccabees states, the violent zeal of Phinehas inspired the priest Mattathias's revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BCE (see 1 Macc 2:26, 54; cf. 3:8), and likewise the Jewish revolt against the Romans in the first century CE.[11] Such wars against religious and political oppression may be commendable in the eyes of many; nonetheless, they are evidence that violence inscribed in authoritative texts is a real historical force and not "just a story."

More immediately problematic for most readers is the possibility that such biblical metaphors could be used to imagine, execute, and (supposedly) justify violence against women within contemporary communities. The best guard against such misuse of the biblical text and abuse of women (or anyone else) is not to ignore the existence of such texts but rather to sharpen our reading of them. There may be no other place in the Bible where what seems to be the obvious or common-sense reading is so wrong, and potentially so dangerous.

Notes

1. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004), 707.
2. Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1996), 38.

3. See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers V 11–31)," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 469.
4. Jack Sasson, "Numbers 5 and the 'Waters of Judgment,'" in Bach, *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 485.
5. The early rabbinic tradition makes the suggestion that what is envisioned is false swearing; see Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 35, 302.
6. Nathan MacDonald, "'Gone Astray': Dealing with the Sotah (Num 5:11–31)," in *Go Figure! Figuration in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Stanley D. Walters (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 55.
7. 1 Chr 5:27–41 Heb., 6:1–15 Eng., traces the priestly line from Levi son of Jacob through to the period of the Babylonian exile, when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed.
8. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 479.
9. *HALOT* [*Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*] 2:468.
10. In this context, the word "righteousness" (*tsedaqah*) is a pun on the name of the Zadokites, the priests descended from Phinehas, who are said to have a covenant with YHWH from generation to generation, "forever" (Num 25:13).
11. See John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 1 (2003): 12–13.

5

Deuteronomy

LEARNING TO LOVE AND TO FEAR—*DEUTERONOMY 1–11*

DEUTERONOMY—LITERALLY, THE "SECOND [Giving] of the Teachin Law" (*deutero-nomos*)—is a liminal book, both geographically and literarily.] geographical setting is "across the Jordan . . . in the rift-region" (Deut 1:1), at tl very edge of the land of Canaan. Literarily, it is simultaneously the final book Torah, the story of Israel before it enters the land of Canaan, and the preface to tl so-called **Deuteronomistic History**, Joshua through Kings, which recounts tl long and finally tragic story of Israel in the land, from entry to exile. The rheto ical mode of the book fits its liminal position; Deuteronomy is framed as Mose valedictory address as he prepares Israel for life in the land—without him. Her "across the Jordan, Moses undertook to make this instruction [*torah*] plain" (1:5 "Make it plain!" says the congregation to the preacher in black church traditio Indeed, Deuteronomy is styled as something like a sermon, filled with motiv tional language about what it means for Israel to enter not just into the land bı fully into covenant with YHWH.

Taking Torah Personally

The tone here is immediate and personal. In the preceding books of Torah, thirc person narrative and legal prescription predominate. By contrast, Deuteronom opens with a long pastoral discourse (Deut 1:1–4:43) by Moses the teacher—fc that is his persona in Deuteronomy, the prototypical rabbi—spoken directly t the people Israel:

> See, I have taught you statutes and ordinances just as YHWH my God commanded me, to enact [them] thus within the land into which you are