

Towards the Promised Land (and the Israelites' Future Neighbors)

1. Numbers 21-36

- Whereas Num 10-21 focused on internal problems (i.e., various rebellions) and the authority structures thereby tested and reasserted/refined, Num 21-36 also considers the external problems facing Israel as it enters the Promised Land, namely, the inhabitants of the Land.
- The narrative frame is Israel's continued movement towards the Promised Land, particularly its time in the Transjordan (i.e., the territory east of the Jordan River and west of the Arabian desert), from which the Israelites will eventually enter the Promised Land from the east (i.e., at Jericho; see Joshua 6).
- Here too, narrative and legal material, and materials attributed to different sources, are interwoven:

Narrative Material	Legal Material
21:1-3: Defeat of Arad (J)	
21:4-9 Story of the Bronze Serpent (E)	
21:21-35: Defeat of Sihon and Og (J)	
22-24: Story of Balaam the prophet (E)	
25: Israelites worship of Baal (JP)	
26: Second census (P)	
27: Complaint of Zelophad's daughters and resultant inheritance laws (P)	
28: Moses learns of his impending death, and Joshua is appointed as his successor (P)	
	28-29: Laws about sacrifices for festivals (added by redactor?)
	30: Laws about vows (P)
31: War against Midian (P)	
32: Allotment of tribal portions to Gad and Reuben (P)	
33: Recap of Israel's itinerary from Egypt to Canaan (P, possibly with some redactional additions)	
34: Boundaries of the Promised Land (P)	
35: Levitical cities and cities of refuge (P)	
	36: Inheritance laws (P)

- Read together with Num 10-21, the result is a series of tales that explore internal and external challenges of settlement in the Promised Land, dealing with the practical internal issues of succession and organization of leadership of the Israelites, on the one hand, and of their relationships with neighboring peoples, on the other.

2. Authority and succession of authority within Israel

- The exploration of authority in Num 10-21 is narratively necessitated and textually framed by a broader shift, as underlined by the first celebration of Passover as remembered event as opposed to lived event (Num 9) and by the fact that no one of the generation of the Exodus will not live to enter the Promised Land, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua. This shift, which points to the significance of Numbers within the Pentateuch, is from [1] the generation which was led by Moses and Aaron, which lived through the Exodus, and which directly experienced God's salvific actions and revelations, to [2] the next generation, which symbolizes all future generations inasmuch as it marks the beginning of the life of the nation which lives in remembrance of these formative events, which is shaped by them in their identity as well as laws and worship and everyday life, and which experiences first-hand the actualization of the promise that God then reasserted: His promise of Land to Abraham.
- Moses and Aaron → their successors, Joshua and Eleazar. Upon Aaron's death (Num 20), Eleazar succeeds him as his son and thus next in line of the succession of Aaronid high priesthood, such that the issue of priestly authority (thanks in large part to the P source) is resolve forever after. Upon God's telling Moses of his impending death (Num 28), Joshua is chosen by God, leaving the issue of future military/political authority unanswered (as it will not be until the story of the establishment of the kingship in 1-2 Samuel). Whereas the priestly authority of Aaron's line is contested (i.e., by Korah et al in Num 16-17), Joshua's appointment happens without incident.
- Moses' direct intercession to God on behalf of the people → other prophets and leaders, and a combination of intercession and the Israelites' own actions to avoid divine punishment. Not only is the spirit of prophecy spread onto 70 elders in Num 11, but the end of Numbers (25, 27, 32) includes tales of sinners killed by the priest Phineas (a grandson of Aaron whose actions further affirm the eternity of Aaronid high priesthood) before any divine punishment can be meted out and of Israelites complains that are reasonable and either

lead to God's revelation of addenda to His laws (Zelophad's daughters) or to Moses' compromise apart from consultation with God (tribes of Reuben and Gad)

- Land and inheritance: a more concrete concern for the theme of Promised Land is evident in the concern for allotting portions to each tribe, on the one hand, and in the outlining of various inheritance laws, on the other.

3. The Israelites' Future Territory and Neighbors

- Since the calling of Abraham (Gen 12), Israel's entry into the Promised Land has been a repeated theme in the Pentateuch, shaping its narrative thrust by means of repetitions of the promise (esp. in Gen and Ex), statements about the people of the Land being expelled and replaced because of their deeds (esp. in Lev), and travel notices that describe the Israelites' progressive journey towards it (esp. Ex, Num).
- Within Numbers (i.e., 13-14), we first encounter Israel's future neighbors in the exaggerated report of the spies (who say that the inhabitants of the Land are like Giants, compared to which the Israelites are only grasshoppers). This serves as an occasion for the reiteration of the promise and the defense of God's fidelity to it by Caleb and Joshua.
- The first hint of the actual hostility of peoples in the Promised Land is the encounter with Edom (i.e., descendants of Esau; Num 20), who refuse Israel passage through their land, despite Moses' offer to take the shortest route and pay for any resources that they use.
- War against the peoples of the Land begins with an attack against the Israelites by Arad (Num 21) to which Israel responds with successful force; so too Moses asks Sihon of the Amorites for peaceful passage through their lands only to be attacked, and Og of Bashan then attacks Israel without provocation. In each case, God is on Israel's side, and they are victorious.
- Balak of Moab takes a non-military route, trying to get the prophet and seer Balaam to curse Israel. This fails since YHWH appears to Balak and reveals oracles to him, such that Balaam blesses Israel instead of cursing them. Balaam appears to have been a famous seer in the area, as suggested by 8th c. non-Israelite inscriptions about him as "seer of the Gods." In Numbers, both positive and negative traditions about Balam appear, but the positive ones are dominant. Balak serves as non-Israelite witness to YHWH, in a similar way as the Egyptian magicians who are convinced by the plagues that YHWH is God (Ex 8:19) and as Moses' father-in-law Hobab/Jethro, a priest of Midian who chooses to come with the Israelites on their journey (Ex 18:19; Num 10:29). Num 22-24 is not surprisingly attributed to E, who also depicts God as appearing to Abimelech of Gerar in Gen 20.
- Numbers also explore the other dangers that come with interaction with the people of the Land, namely, the danger of being led into worship of other gods. This danger is closely linked with sexual relations with non-Israelite women, as exemplified by tale of the Moabite women in Num 25. The concern, notably, is not with intermarriage in a broad sense, as the Pentateuch reports in positive or neutral terms about many patriarchs and other important biblical figures taking foreign wives (e.g., Judah, Joseph, Moses). The problem, rather is with specific peoples of the Land who might lead Israelites away from worship of YHWH and encourage them to adopt other gods and practices. The equation between false worship and marriage with people of the Land is, presumably, what accounts for Phineas' zeal.