Numbers: Responses to Questions I Have Been Asked

There is more info in my *Numbers and Deuteronomy for Everyone* (Louisville: WJK/London: SPCK, 2010).

What has changed so much that there is now so much wrath? God doesn’t absorb sin. He exudes wrath.

\*\*At one level the answer is that what has changed is that God has brought Israel out of Egypt and reaffirmed the covenant relationship with them, and laid down his expectations for the way they will respond and live their life as his people. A linked answer is that this sequences of stories is another narrative theological exposition of an issue (like the stories about the ancestors, or about the plagues, or about what went on in Exodus 32—34)—it’s an exposition of what can go wrong in Israel’s experience of life and how Israel can respond and what consequences follow. A further linked answer is that this is a sequence of stories told for settled Israel to hear, in order that it can learn from them. Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 10 about the importance of these stories for the church. So Israel and the church need to be aware of these dynamics and be wary of them in their own life.

*Why was Aaron not punished in the same way that Miriam was?*

\*\*Because she was the leader (as she often was)? Note Numbers 12 says "Miriam and Aaron."

*The Torah tells stories that have Yahweh imparting sickness and illness to his people to teach them lessons. Is this the God we worship today? In other words, would Christ affirm this theology with his healing stories?*

\*\*Christ and the NT do affirm this theology (e.g., Mk 2:5; 1 Cor 10:1-13; 11:29-32). Of course, it may not be the God we worship today! You imply that our beliefs today are the same as those of Christ, but this is not so! We make up our own beliefs!

*God’s punishments are very harsh in much of the Torah. For instance, when a man is found collecting sticks on the Sabbath he is stoned. This is not the same God that is revealed in Jesus when a woman is brought to Him who has committed adultery and they want to stone Him. How can God be the same yesterday, today and forever, and act in such different ways?*

\*\*You say “in much” but actually there are just two or three such events are there not? There are lots of occasions throughout scripture where God acts in different ways in different circumstances. God is often long-suffering but then decides it is time to punish. In the last couple of days I happen to have read Luke 20:9-19, in which Jesus apparently pictures his father destroying people because they don’t give him the fruit of his vineyard, and 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 (just read it!). In Acts 5, two people get killed for falsifying their pledge. Are you sure the God revealed in Jesus is so different? So God being the same yesterday, today, and forever doesn't mean God always acts in the same way. God makes different decisions in different contexts, as we do. But that doesn't mean being inconsistent or arbitrary. How fortunate that God does things like the Numbers 15 or Acts 5 story only about once every few hundred years! But how important that we see that the second coming will involve that kind of action!

Why are whole families treated as responsible because of the words of a few?

\*\*Because the destiny of families is regularly tied up with the stance of a few (e.g., children with parents)? Admittedly that observation only pushes the question one stage back—why did God create us so that family is basic to human life in a way that it isn’t for some animals? But God did.

Why does God command Moses to put a serpent on a pole and look at it. Is that not very close to worshipping idols? The Israelites are looking to a created thing instead of God for salvation.

\*\*You are right that this is how it turned out (2 Kgs 18:4). But it shows there is a difference between an image that people make on their own initiative, and something sacramental that God invites them to use as a means whereby God heals them.

In the Balaam story, why does God tell Balaam to go to Balak and then get angry that he is going? It seems like something is missing in the text or there is some sort of disconnect between 22:21 and 22:22.

\*\*I presume it is because God didn’t really want Balaam to go and only agreed when he asked the second time, after God had told him not to go, but he has come to try to change God's mind when offered more prestige and more money.

A talking donkey? Is this more parable?

\*\*Maybe. But why shouldn’t God talk through a donkey?

Earlier the Torah has said that God changes his mind, but now Balaam says he doesn’t (Numbers 23:19)!

\*\*He doesn’t change his mind about blessing, only about punishing! Underlying that point is the fact that he is not fickle.

Balaam doesn’t seem a bad guy. Why does he have a bad reputation in Christian circles?

\*\*See Numbers 31:16-16 which implies a link back with 25:1-3—in other words, it implies that B was involved there; then on that basis 2 Peter 2:15; Revelation 2:14.

*What are we to make of the fact that God inspires someone outside the covenant community in this way, not only with general but with specific revelation? Does that still happen? Is there salvation for God-fearers apart from an explicit confession of Christian faith?*

\*\*I don’t see why God shouldn’t speak through someone outside the covenant community in this way, but I don’t think that’s got anything to do with salvation (just as God’s speaking through someone inside the covenant community has nothing to do with salvation).

Was Moses’ denial of entry to the Promised Land an instance where God could/should have exercised his forgiveness? Is Moses more tolerant than God? Did the interactions between them manifest God’s heart or was God pushing the envelope to elicit a response from Moses and to cause him to grow as a leader of Yahweh’s people?

\*\*The scriptures portray God as long suffering but from time to time saying “That’s it! Now I am going to act.” Certainly God could have forgiven Moses, but God apparently decided this was one of those moments. Moses doesn’t seem all that troubled—Deuteronomy 34 is very touching. Yes, sometimes human beings are more tolerant than God – I’m sure I would have let Moses go into the land. God has more capacity than we have to take tough decisions when they are needed. Of course, God is tough on himself, too! Maybe you are right that Moses could have been driven to plead with God, and does not do so (though there is no hint that God is seeking to cause him to grow)—rather like Abraham not resisting when God asks for his son. Abraham and Moses are bold in praying for others but accept God’s will for themselves.

There doesn’t seem to be rhyme or reason for the rules that are placed side by side. Why is this material so?

\*\*There may be all sorts of reasons for the order—it’s rather like the order in Psalms or Proverbs or some of our hymnbooks. Sometimes there are links of subject. Sometimes there may be a verbal link that one may not be able to see in English. Sometimes the order may result from the accidents of the history of how the material came together.

*In 13:33 the returning spies mention seeing the Nephilim in the land. Are these the same Nephilim referred to in Genesis 6:4?*

\*\*Well presumably those Nephilim died in the flood... These ones are apparently big guys who were the kind of people you could imagine being the offspring of unions between supernatural beings and human women.