NEARER MY GOD TO THEE:

NUMBERS, PROXIMITY TO GOD, AND CHRISTOLOGY

BY JACOB D. GERBER

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The first nine chapters of Numbers seem, at first reading, to be merely a hodgepodge of census data, Levitical codes, adultery tests, and wilderness narratives. In this article, however, I will argue that this portion of Scripture primarily answers two basic questions: (1) How can holy Yahweh dwell in the presence of a sinful people without being polluted? and (2) How can a sinful people live and prosper in the presence of holy Yahweh without being destroyed? Put another way, how can holiness remain *in close proximity* to that which is not holy? It is difficult to overstate the theological ramifications of these questions, because Yahweh's dwelling among his people is, in some ways, the largest goal of the Bible's story. This is the case from the beginning—when he dwells with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—all the way to the end, when John hears a climactic "loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God'" (Rev. 21:3). Put simply, if Yahweh cannot dwell in the midst of his people, then in what sense does he qualify as their God, and in what sense do they qualify as his people? Furthermore, if Yahweh's people may not come into the presence of their Creator, then what hope do they have of finding life, joy and salvation?

The solution to these problems in Numbers depends largely upon divided physical space and geographical distance: Yahweh dwells in the midst of his people by locating himself in the tabernacle around which the people of Israel camp. Make no mistake, however—the lines between Yahweh's space and Israel's space are absolute, and if any unauthorized encroacher dares to cross those boundaries, the prescribed penalty is death. In the book of Leviticus, Yahweh had invited Israel toward himself—that is, into the tabernacle—by calling only a small group of Israelites (the priests) to draw near in order to act as representatives for the whole nation. In this way, Yahweh would mediate his presence to his people through strict regulations that will preserve *both* the holiness of Yahweh *and* the safety of the people. In Numbers 1-9, however, the focus falls not so much on the priests as on the priests' assistants—that is, all the other members of the tribe of Levi. Beyond only the priests and the Levites, however, this section of Scripture discusses how closely to Yahweh all kinds of people may

come—e.g., adulterers, the unclean, Nazirites, and even the other tribes.

Still, this strict system was never meant to be the final way in which Yahweh dwells with his people. This portion of the Law is meant to teach us the abiding theological chasm that separates Yahweh's holiness from humanity's sinfulness—that is, we who are living today have the same problem, but a new solution: at the proper time, Yahweh superseded this old system by giving sinful humanity a new way to enter the holy places: Jesus Christ himself. Numbers, then, is not merely a history of Israel's religious practices, but rather a text that ultimately should inform our theology of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Levites' Nearness to God

The book of Numbers opens with a census to number "all in Israel who are able to go to war" (Num. 1:3), but one from which members of the tribe of Levi ("the Levites") are to be excluded (Num. 1:47). Instead of having the Levites serve the nation through warfare, Yahweh instructs Moses to:

> appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it. They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of it and shall camp around the tabernacle. When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. (Num. 1:50-51)

The service of the Levites will not be warfare, but service to the tabernacle. Specifically, Yahweh calls them to be stewards of the tabernacle's physical structure and its furnishings, which will involve two tasks: (1) tearing down the structure, transporting it, and pitching the tent at the new camp site whenever the nation moves; and (2) acting as a buffer by camping between the tabernacle and the other tribes and the tabernacle—that is, between the human sphere and the divine sphere—since any "outsider" who comes near will be killed.

At this point, three points may help to clear up some of the genealogical and tribal confusion. (1) All the children of Levi (the son of Jacob/Israel) are "Levites," members of the tribe of Levi. (2) Within the tribe of Levi, there are three distinct clans, named after Levi's three sons: Gershon, Kohath,

and Merari (Ex. 6:17). (3) Kohath (the son of Levi, the son of Jacob) had four sons: Amram, Izhar,[1] Hebron, and Uzziel (Ex. 6:18). Amram (the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, the son of Jacob) had two sons, Aaron and Moses (Ex. 6:20). Only those born to Aaron (the son of Amram, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, the son of Jacob) qualify to serve as priests.

So, it is important to recognize that, when Yahweh calls the Levites to tabernacle service, he does not call all of them to be priests. In Leviticus, Yahweh had ordained only the sons of Aaron as priests. Here in Numbers, however, Yahweh commands Moses, saying, "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him" (Num. 3:6). By bringing the Levites "near" for temple service, Yahweh graciously allows them a closer, more intimate experience of his glory than the rest of the Israel would know; however, he does not allow the Levites into the holy places where the priests served, much less all the way into the holy of holies where only the high priest could go, and that only once per year (Lev. 16). So, it is *not* the role of the Levites to represent Israel before God, or even to mediate God's presence to Israel—the priests alone bear those responsibilities. The role of the Levites is merely to *assist* the priests as they perform their priestly duties.

Yahweh quickly quantifies this work force by requiring a second census: "list the sons of Levi, by fathers' houses and by clans; every male from a month upward you shall list" (Num. 3:15). Then, Yahweh assigns responsibilities and camping location to the three clans. The 7,500 Gershonites (2,630 eligible for service) make camp on the west side of the tabernacle, and they are given responsibility over the screens, hangings, and skins of the tabernacle (Num. 3:21-26; 4:21-28, 38-41). The 6,200 Merarites (3,200 eligible for service) make camp on the north side of the tabernacle, and they are given responsibility over the frames, pillars, poles, bases, and cords of the tabernacle (Num. 3:33-37; 4:29-33, 42-45). The 8,600 Kohathites (2,750 eligible for service) make camp on the south side of the tabernacle, and they are given responsibility over the furnishings and furniture of the tabernacle (Num. 3:27-32; 4:1-20, 34-37).

1 Korah, the leader of the rebellion against Moses in Num. 16, is the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath (Ex. 6:21; Num. 16:1). Therefore, Korah is the 1st cousin of Moses and Aaron.

The longest single section of this material (Num. 4:1-20) concentrates on the task of the Kohathites, since they will come into the closest proximity to the "most holy things" (Num. 4:4). Surprisingly, Yahweh directs most of his instructions in this section not toward the Kohathites themselves, but toward the Aaronic priests, commanding them to veil all the holy furnishings of the tabernacle sufficiently before the Kohathites would come to transport them to Israel's next camp site. Yahweh sternly warns twice that the Kohathites should not come into direct contact with his holy things. In the first warning, Yahweh warns that the Kohathites must not touch the holy things: "And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, as the camp sets out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry these, but they must not touch the holy things, lest they die. These are the things of the tent of meeting that the sons of Kohath are to carry" (Num. 4:15). In the second warning, however, Yahweh cautions that the Kohathites must not even look upon the holy things: "Let not the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites, but deal thus with them, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things. Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint them each to his task and to his burden, *but they shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die*" (Num. 4:18-20, my emphasis). Notice also that this is a charge for the *priests* to "deal thus with them, that they may live and not die." Ultimately, Yahweh held the priests responsible for supervising this work to ensure the care of the holy things as well as to preserve the safety of the Levites.

In the same way, the Levites are responsible for protecting the tabernacle from the rest of the nation of Israel, both to ensure the care of the holy things as well as the safety of the people. Right from the beginning of the book of Numbers, Yahweh insists that the Levites alone may come near to the tabernacle: "When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. *And if an outsider*[2] *comes near, he shall be put to death*" (Num. 1:51). The same phrase occurs in Num. 3:10, when Yahweh describes the

2 Interestingly, the word *outsider* (*zār*) is the same word used in Lev. 10 to describe the *strange* (*zārāh,* 10:1) fire that Nadab and Abihu offered to Yahweh.

comprehensive "guard" duty that the Levites are to perform in relation to Aaron, the priests, the whole congregation of Israel, the tabernacle, and all the tabernacle's furnishings:

> They shall keep guard over [Aaron the priest] and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle. And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. (Num. 3:7-10)

So, one of the major aspects of the Levites' task was to keep non-Levites from coming too closely to the holy things. Milgrom insists that this is "the most important function of the Levites" since an encroacher's sin "can pollute the sacred precincts and his physical encroachment upon the sancta can bring down the wrath of the Deity upon the entire community."[3] For this specific reason, Yahweh has the Levites set up camp between the tabernacle and the rest of Israel, with the Merarites on the north side, the Gershonites on the west side, and the Kohathites on the south side. The priests had the most important job of protecting the east side of the tabernacle, where the entrance was located: "Those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tent of meeting toward the sunrise, were Moses and Aaron and his sons, guarding the sanctuary itself, to protect the people of Israel. *And any outsider who came near was to be put to death*" (Num. 3:38, my emphasis).

The Levites, then, take on a unique and complicated role in the book of Numbers. Essentially, Yahweh calls them to live between the spheres of the human and divine. They are to be brought "near" the divine realm, but they are not allowed direct access to the holy things of God as the priests are. In fact, the Levites are merely cleansed (purified from uncleanness in the human realm; Num. 8), whereas the sons of Aaron had been sanctified (made "Holy to the LORD" for participation in the divine realm; Ex. 28:36). Still, they do not have the liberty to live in the human realm with the rest of Israel—they must stand as guards between the tabernacle and the other tribes. Yahweh bestows upon the Levites a special calling to assist the priests for the good of the nation of Israel; the Levites themselves, however,

3 J. Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1990), *xl*.

are neither fish nor fowl. Although this semi-nearness to Yahweh is a great privilege, it is also a source of great confusion and contention, as we will see below.

Israel's Nearness to God

Immediately after the long section dealing with the Levites' nearness to God (Num. 3-4), Yahweh turns to deal with the the rest of Israel's proximity to him in ch. 5. Even though the Levites will form protective hedge between the eleven tribes and the tabernacle, the Israelite camp is sufficiently close to Yahweh's presence to require a certain degree of purity. Certainly, the standards for Israel are less strict than the standards for the Levites (whose standards are less strict than the priests), but Yahweh does require a higher degree of cleanliness inside the camp than he does outside the camp —the purity standards decrease proportionately as the physical distance from Yahweh increases. Accordingly, Yahweh speaks to Moses, saying, "Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell" (Num. 5:2-3). People unclean for whatever reason—skin disease,[4] bodily discharge, contact with the dead, or any other possible uncleanliness—must now reside outside of the camp until whatever made them unclean has passed and they have been ceremonially cleansed through the appropriate process. The issue here does not seem to be the safety of those who are unclean; the only stated rationale for this camp-wide policy is to keep the camp "in the midst of which I [Yahweh] dwell" free from defilement.

Beyond requiring ongoing purity within the camp, Yahweh ordains a special process whereby a normal Israelite may further separate himself (or herself—the text is explicitly gender inclusive; cf. Num. 6:2) from defilements in a special way so that "Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the LORD, he shall be holy" (Num. 6:5). This process, called a "Nazirite vow," seems to privilege the Nazirite with a level of access to God even beyond that which the Levites enjoy.

4 "Skin disease" is a better description for what many Bibles "misleadingly" translate as *leprosy*: G. Wenham, *The Book of Numbers*, OTG (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 37.

Ashley demonstrates the close connection between the description of Nazirites and and that of priests:

> Several of the regulations governing the Nazirite are related to those concerning the priest or high priest. The priests are forbidden to drink wine while they are serving in the tent of meeting (Lev. 10:9), and the Nazirite is forbidden wine at all times (Num. 6:3). The Nazirite must also not imbibe any strong drink or grape products for the extent of his or her vow (vv. 3-4). The priest may not pollute himself by contact, with corpses, except for immediate family members (Lev. 22:1-3); the high priest and the Nazirite may not come into contact with any corpse, even that of immediate family members (Lev. 22:10-12; Num. 6:6).[5]

Although there is no suggestion that Nazirites are allowed into the holy places of the tabernacle in the way that priests are, the fact that the text describes Nazirites as "holy" certainly suggests some kind of special access to Yahweh, whatever that may be.

All (clean) Israelites, however, were to enjoy the presence of Yahweh as they worshiped him, regardless of their tribal affiliation or their Nazirite status. Immediately following the passage concerning the Nazirite vow, Yahweh directs Moses to instruct Aaron and his sons about how to properly "bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, 'The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.' So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them" (Num. 6:23-27). For our purposes, this benediction has two important aspects. First, the last two clauses clearly "ask, in slightly different terms, that Yahweh show his benevolent presence to his faithful people."[6] Not even Moses himself is allowed to gaze upon the face of Yahweh (Ex. 33:20); nevertheless, the prayer here is that Yahweh make his own face to shine upon the people in grace, and to lift up his countenance upon them in peace. Aaron's blessing is a prayer that Yahweh might grant Israel the kind of access to him that they could never hope to gain on their own.

Second, v. 27 suggests that the benediction *actually accomplishes* for Israel such a level of access to Yahweh: "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." By this description, Yahweh suggests that Aaron's blessing is intended, at least in part, as one of the ways

5 T. R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 141
6 Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 152.

in which the priests mediate the presence of Yahweh to the people—the put Yahweh's very name *upon* the people. Wenham notes, "Putting God's name somewhere affirms that the place belongs to God (cf. Deut. 12:5-7), so the priestly words are a declaration that the people of Israel belong to the LORD."[7] Of course, Israel's belonging to Yahweh does not connote a relationship of mere property, but one of loving possession.

The people of Israel, however, are not merely passive receptors of God's gracious and holy presence. Ch. 7 describes, in great and repetitive detail, the offerings that each of the tribes brought into the tabernacle. The offerings compensate the Levites for their service (Num. 7:5), but here, they also celebrate the consecration of the tabernacle. Interestingly, the verb used to describe the way in which the gifts were brought in v. 2 is a form of the verb *qarab* ("to come near"), the same word used to describe "if any outsider *comes near*, he shall be put to death" (Num. 1:51). In Num. 7, however, the word is not used to describe a person *coming near* to Yahweh, but is rather used in a causative sense, where a person *brings an offering near* to Yahweh. The implication is that, although the people of Israel are forbidden from having direct, personal access to Yahweh, they may nevertheless approach him through bringing their offerings into his holy tabernacle. In this way, Yahweh establishes a means whereby common Israelites may indirectly approach his holiness—through their offerings—even without having to be encumbered by the requirements of the Nazirite vow.

Finally, I would suggest that we might shed some light on the highly puzzling adultery test in Num. 5 by exploring this motif of proximity to Yahweh. Read out of context, the test sounds bizarre, barbaric, and superstitious. If we look closely, however, we will that the directions for the test includes the same causative form of the verb *qarab* mentioned above: "And the priest *shall bring her near* and set her before the LORD" (Num. 5:16). Throughout Numbers 1-9, we have seen Yahweh warn outsiders to keep their distance (i.e., not *to come near*) for their own safety—sinful people in Yahweh's presence will certainly be destroyed. The same logic seems to be in play here. If (and only if) the

7 Wenham, *The Book of Numbers*, 39-40.

woman is guilty of the adultery that her husband suspects, her sinfulness will cause a curse to come upon her, since she will have *come near* to Yahweh in an unclean state, encroaching upon his holiness with her sinfulness. If, however, her husband's suspicions are unfounded, then she will bear no curse—she is clean, and so she does not offend Yahweh's holiness.

Challenges

These first nine chapters of Numbers set out a vision for a perfectly structured society, where Yahweh's holiness may dwell in the midst of Israel for as long as the Israelites maintain Yahweh's intricate system of physical and spiritual barriers between them and their God. Unfortunately, this elegant system faces direct challenges immediately after Israel leaves Sinai to move toward the Promised Land (Num. 10:11-36).

The first words of Num. 11 signal a problem: "And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp." This was not the first time that the people complained against Yahweh about their physical provisions (Ex. 16-17), and it would not be the last (Num. 13-14; Num. 21:4-9). Despite the indescribable privilege of Yahweh's presence in their midst, the Israelites wanted to return to Egypt (Num. 11:5; 14:2-4)!

More shocking than the whining of the common people, though, is the extent to which those called to be closest to Yahweh fail. In Num. 12, Miriam and Aaron challenge the unique leadership position to which Yahweh has called Moses, saying, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (Num. 12:2). For their arrogance, Yahweh strikes Miriam with leprosy for a time, causing her to be "shut outside the camp seven days" (Num. 12:15). While the text is unclear about why Aaron was *not* similarly punished, the meaning of Miriam's punishment is abundantly clear: she had claimed a privilege of close proximity to Yahweh that only Moses enjoyed, and so Yahweh rendered her unfit to remain even inside the borders of the camp with the rest of the Israelites.

Even the Levites themselves, who have been given such a high privilege through their special status of temple assistants, challenge the limitations of their roles. In Num. 16, Korah the Kohathite leads a rebellion against Moses "with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, and well-known men" (Num. 16:2) by complaining that "You take too much! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and Yahweh is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of Yahweh?" (Num. 16:3). Notice carefully the nature of the complaint—Korah wants to insist that *all* in the assembly are holy. Remember, however, that the Korah and the rest of the Levites were merely *purified* (made clean; Num. 8:5-22), not *sanctified* (made holy) with the priests. Jenson notes that the Levites "are never described as holy,"[8] making Korah's objection all the more presumptuous.

We should be clear about the nature of these problems—the system that Yahweh put in place was *not* at fault in any of these challenges. The system of physical divisions to keep appropriate spiritual distance between holiness and sinfulness was perfect; the problem was not with Yahweh, but with the people. Pride, greed, and selfishness disqualified all of Israel (even Moses himself; Num. 20:10-13) from enjoying the blessings that Yahweh would have granted to his people within the context of this system. From this point on, Israel would continue to fail in keeping Yahweh's requirements for his people of purity and holiness—neither judges nor kings nor the temple nor prophets could sufficiently keep the balance between sinful Israel and holy Yahweh. Even in Numbers, the depth of the problem is clear—Yahweh will never dwell with his people unless something more drastic than physical divisions can bridge the chasm between his holiness and their sinfulness.

The Christology of Numbers

While the first nine chapters of Numbers may not directly prophesy anything about Jesus, nor give any specific information to illuminate the mystery of the incarnation, nor even foreshadow anything like a cross, this section of Scripture nevertheless has its own important contribution to our

8 P. Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World*, JSOTS 106 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 131.

doctrine of Christ. Namely, this section illustrates a problem that only the Messiah is able to solve: How *can* Yahweh dwell with his people?

Simply put, the Son of God had to become human if he wanted to reconcile humanity to God, since the problem in Numbers is *precisely* that God's people *cannot* approach him—outsiders are to be put to death, so only a new kind of Man may come near. On the other hand, no mere human could reconcile humanity to God, since even if one person were sinless and therefore able to dwell closely to Yahweh's holiness (as Adam and Eve had done in the Garden), he could bring along anyone else into the presence of Yahweh—only *God* can purify and sanctify others. The Christology of Numbers, then, is that it underscores the implicit theological necessity that the Savior of Israel must be able to move freely from the camp (where sinners dwell) all the way into the holy of holies (where Yahweh dwells).

The Church, then, should read the complex regulations in Numbers in the light of Christ: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence *to enter the holy places* by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, *let us draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts *sprinkled clean* [cf. Num. 8:7] from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19-22). We may draw near to God in holiness *and* purity without an outsider's fear of death because Christ has secured our access through his own high priestly ministry and self-sacrifice.