

THE UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

VOL. XXVIII.

MARCH, 1917.

No. 3

GENESIS A MIRACLE IN MORALS.

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Strachan says: "Criticism has had its innings, and the time has come for appreciation." So he proceeds to write nobly on the beauty of "Hebrew Ideals." As a matter of fact he was no less in the realm of the higher criticism while defending the Bible than others had been in trying to undermine it. According to Dr. W. W. Moore: "The higher criticism is concerned with the age and *character* of the biblical books . . . their historical and *theological* contents." Hence Mr. Strachan, planting his guns in a different part of the same field, simply employed them, as a constructive critic, against a destructive element operating in the same sphere of investigation. And we shall be playing the role of higher critic just as much in quickening faith in the book as others in trying to kill it. A class of thinkers and would-be world leaders say the Creator, in religion, as they believe He did in nature, started with the lower and grossly imperfect forms and has gradually evolved the highest. Just as men are thought to have come up from ancestors, who first were senseless bivalves and snapping turtles, then fish and reptiles, then the advanced orders of beasts and birds, lastly men with brains, moral natures and evolved immortality, they say God, through the power or principle of evolution, had men to invent and practice morals that now disgust and to adopt and worship ideals of God that we would

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS: DISOBEDIENCE AND DISCIPLINE.

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One of the most varied, one of the most tumultuous, one of the most tragic, one of the most human books in all the Bible is the book that is to engage us now. Darkness and tempest, the lightning that rives and levels the monarchs of the forest and the restless surf that thunders against the crags of some mighty headland, with here and there blue sky and grateful peace, mingle their voices in the chorus of these pages.

The book of Numbers, called by the Jews generally "In the Wilderness," from the scene of the wandering, was called by the Septuagint translators of 250 B. C., "Arithmoi," which the Vulgate translators of 400 A. D. translated as "Numeri," whence the name "Numbers" by which we know the book. The name is most appropriate, for the book begins with a census and then records another thirty-eight years later on, the first at Sinai, the second in Moab. The scene of the book is in the main the northeastern edge of the wilderness of Paran. The time covered by the book was, it is safe to say, the longest thirty-eight years that ever fell to the lot of Israel. Not even the years of oppression in Egypt could have been so tedious and harassing as this generation of a people's life. The desolateness of the country itself and the tragedy of the events were enacted on it made Moses describe it later on as "that great and terrible wilderness" (Deut. 1:19). It is this portion of the history of Israel that the book of Numbers records, though some of the decades are given the merest mention.

A fivefold outline of the book will best reveal its contents:
I. Preparations for Leaving Sinai (1:1-10:10).

II. From Sinai to the Southern Border of Canaan (10:11-14:45).

III. The Thirty-eight Years' Wandering (chs. 15-19).

IV. The March to Moab (chs. 20-21).

V. On the Steppes of Moab (chs. 22-36).

I. Preparations for Leaving Sinai (1:1-10:10).

The people of Israel had spent almost a year at Sinai, and here events of the first importance had been enacted. From the thundering and quaking heights above the converging plains the law had been spoken. At the base of the mount that might be touched great numbers died in punishment for idolatry and persistence in the spirit that actuated it. Here for seven months the host was busy with the erection of the tabernacle, which was finally dedicated and its services ordered with impressive ceremonies; and now the time drew near for further marching. A census of the men available for war, by their tribes, was taken. It was found there were 603,550 of twenty years old and upward, exclusive of the Levites, who were separately numbered and were found to total 22,273. The arrangements for camp and march were then ordered. The law of the Nazirite was given. No wine must pass his lips. No razor must come upon his head. No dead body must be approach. Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist stand among the best known Nazirites of Jewish history. Offerings were made by the princes of the tribes for the complete furnishing of the tabernacle and the Levites were purified for the service of it. Then, just one year from the time the host left Egypt, the Passover was kept. It must have been an occasion of the greatest inspiration when in sight of the Mount of the Law, with the memories of an eventful year fresh upon them, and with anticipations of the coming march, Israel solemnly observed this greatest of all the feasts. It was a fitting preparation for the journey they were now ready to begin.

We should not forget in reviewing this section of the book of Numbers the blessing of the priests upon the people:

"And Jehovah spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel: ye shall say unto them:

Jehovah bless thee and keep thee:

Jehovah make his face to shine upon thee

And be gracious unto thee:

Jehovah lift up his countenance upon thee

And give thee peace." (6:22-26, A. R. V.)

What is more beautiful among the benedictions of Scripture? A friend of mine said he was accustomed to use this benediction at the beginning of his form of marriage. One day, after a wedding, a gentleman came forward and complimented him extravagantly on his beautiful introduction to his wedding ceremony. He seemed much surprised when my friend told him where he could find it in the book of Numbers. A good many good people do not know how many good things there are in the Bible.

This short but busy period in Israel's history, when preparations for departure from Mt. Sinai went steadily forward and all arrangements were made for the march, would at once remind the chosen people that their objective was not Sinai but Canaan. The land flowing with milk and honey, leagues further on, was to be their home. Here at Sinai they had received the Law. Here they had set up the tabernacle, in comparative leisure. But experiences and conquests on past Sinai were to mark future days. It is not enough that the believer receive the truth in his reading of God's word or at the mouth of one who stands as an ambassador of the Most High. It is not enough that he offer worship to God, however elaborate that worship may be. It is quite as necessary, as God sees and orders it, that inspired by the truth and sustained by worship there be progression in every grace, struggle with every enemy of the soul, victory through trust in Him that can make us overcome, and at the end, when the flood is crossed, an abundant entrance into the land of golden promise.

II. From Sinai to the Southern Border of Canaan (10:11-14:45).

All preparations completed, Israel at last broke camp, with the tribe of Judah leading the way. An incident of more than

usual interest marked their leaving. Moses asked his brother-in-law to go with him on the journey the host was now beginning, and in these characteristic words:

"We are journeying unto the place of which Jehovah said, I will give it you: come thou with us and we will do thee good; for Jehovah hath spoken good concerning Israel." (10:29-32, A. R. V.)

This is the message the Church brings to the man who has not definitely identified himself with the interests and the people of God. We are journeying heavenward. God has made promises to us that are exceeding great and precious, both for the life that now is and for that which is to come. Peace of soul is here, a life filling out the mold of the largest manhood, that in every way is worth the while. Possession of the world in its best sense, the conquest of death, the assurance of an endless and glorious life beyond, all are offered.

"And he said unto him, I will not go; but I will depart to my own land and to my kindred."

This, in substance, is the response many give to the gospel invitation. It may be phrased differently, and often is, but "I will not" is the essence. But Moses is not through:

"And he said, Leave us not, I pray thee; forasmuch as thou knowest how we are to encamp in the wilderness, and thou shalt be to us instead of eyes."

Do we ever impress the truth upon those whom we are seeking to reach for Christ that not only do they need the Church, but that the Church needs them, needs their enthusiasm now going to waste, needs their organizing ability, needs their wisdom in counsel, needs their gifts of speech or persuasion, needs any talent, in use elsewhere or nowhere, with which God has dowered them? Nor let us hesitate to claim the choicest. God has a right to the best, and can use it in His service. Indeed, what field that can be mentioned can utilize so much to such good purpose as can the kingdom? Nor let us hesitate to claim for the kingdom and its service the men of limited as well as of largest talent. This brother-in-law could not do many things needed by Israel at that time, but there was

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one thing he could do: he knew the country and had keen eyes for the best camping places for Israel. Many a man who cannot preach a sermon or write a book or project an enterprise may yet have traits that can be used to substantial advantage in the work of the kingdom.

Hobab refused—but later went (Judges 1:16 and 4:11). Perhaps Moses did not altogether drop the matter. Refusals are not always final. Prayer and patience and the further word in season have brought many a man, and will bring many more, into Christ's fellowship and work.

But beyond earthly guides is one who never slumbers nor sleeps. "Jehovah went before them . . . to seek out a resting place for them." The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night led the way. We are not, of course, to think of Israel as constantly on the march. At Sinai, though for special purposes, they had remained a year. At other points along the way they rested as God might direct. Here is the statement, in 9:22: "Whether it were two days or a month or a year that the cloud tarried upon the tabernacle, abiding thereon, Israel remained encamped and journeyed not; but when it was taken up they journeyed."

The events that took place on this stage of the march were enough to try the soul of the most patient man that ever lived. The chapters are crowded with murmuring, rebellion and open mutiny. The mixed multitude were of all the worst offenders, but those of pure or purer blood were not far behind. The burdens became so many and difficult that Moses actually asked that God would kill him. Even Miriam and Aaron rebelled at the preeminence of one who was younger than either. They envied the authority of a man who would willingly have exchanged places with the humblest man in camp. God plagued the people and punished Miriam with leprosy that was removed only after the intercession of Moses. Perhaps she was the instigator, Aaron, as at Sinai, weakly yielding. Then the spies were sent, one from each tribe, to report on the land of Canaan. It is interesting to note the minuteness of the directions given them (13:17-20):

"And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan and said unto them, Get you up this way by the South and go up into the hill country; and see the land, what it is; and the people that dwell therein, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many; and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it is good or bad; and what cities they are that they dwell in, whether in camps or in strongholds; and what the land is, whether it is fat or lean, whether there is wood therein or not. And be ye of good courage and bring of the fruit of the land." (A. R. V.)

Forty days, as we recall, was taken up with the task, the spies probably separating into companies of two for the double purpose of avoiding suspicion and expediting matters. They covered the land completely and brought back their report, or rather, two reports. There was concurrence in this: that the land was all that had been promised and could be desired; and the people were strong and their cities fortified. There was serious difference of opinion, however, on the question of attempting the conquest of the land. Caleb got the ear of the people and proposed immediate invasion:

"Let us go up at once," he said, "and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it."

Caleb furnished the type of men the kingdom needs: men who do not minimize the difficulties of a situation, but knowing dare face them. I heard of a man some years ago who told a friend of mine that he is making a specialty of doing things that people say cannot be done. He was illustrating a proverb which possibly he has never heard: "Is a river said to be impassable? I think it passable, and cross it." About forty years ago a certain young fellow was told that he would never be anything but a weakling physically. He determined to be strong. Those who have admired the compact physique and the seemingly exhaustless vitality of Theodore Roosevelt know how well he carried through his resolution. We may be far from agreeing with him politically, but the last one of us will take off our hats to the man who determined that he would do the impossible thing, and did it.

But that is just the type of man that his own time and people fail often to appreciate. Joshua and Caleb stood out alone

among the twelve. The other ten at once claimed that any invasion was foredoomed to failure and then fell to exaggerating the conditions. The land was one that fairly ate up the inhabitants and all the people they saw in it were giants. They could not possess it. That was settled. Ten against two. Then the storm broke. They proposed to elect another leader and return to Egypt, and when Joshua and Caleb protested and again urged the immediate conquest of the land, the answer was a command to stone them, a commission that probably would have been carried out but for the flashing out of the glory of Jehovah from the tabernacle in the sight of the host.

Such shameless mutiny could not go without its punishment. A pestilence was stayed only by the intercession of Moses, whom God offered to make the head of a new and mightier nation, though the faithless ten died by a plague. The rest of the host from twenty years and upward that had murmured and rebelled were condemned to wander in the wilderness, a year for every day of the spying out of the land, until this rebellious generation had perished from the earth.

They could not believe that this could be. They had seen in the shining of the majesty of God testimony to the forgotten power of God. They saw that they had acted a sinful and a foolish and a tragic part. They would still go up against the land and take it from the south. They were eager for it now. But Moses plainly told them that the opportunity had gone and warned them that they would be smitten before their enemies. In spite of it, they presumptuously attempted to force their way to Canaan and met defeat and rout and disaster at the hands of an enemy whom, with God's help, they could easily have overcome. They would not go when God ordered it, and now they could not go. The opportunity had passed beyond recall.

In this fourteenth chapter of Numbers we have the most tragic chapter in the whole book and one of the most tragic chapters in the Bible. The tragedy may be traced back, as at the beginning of the race, to the unwillingness of men to submit themselves to the wise guidance of God and their refusal

to trust Him for the issue. All that was necessary here was simply to go forward under His leadership in the confidence that He who hurled back the hosts of Pharaoh at the sea would not fail them in this contest with the most formidable of enemies. It seems strange that they should have forgotten the signal deliverance there, and the defeat of Amalek at Rephidim, and the daily manna, and the daily witness of the cloud and fire that had been leading their way, and that they should have been tempted to believe that God would forsake them now, on the eve of the possession of the land for centuries promised them. But let us not be too hasty in judgment. With the Saviour come and risen and glorified and interceding, with his word completed, with the witnesses of successive Pentecosts, with the daily testimony of rescued and transformed lives, with the evidence of fulfilled promises when we fulfil the conditions on which God bases them, we, too, quite often fail or refuse to go in and possess the land in further conquest of self and the near or far world for Christ. May God forgive us that this is ever true! May He pity our frailty and restrain us from presumption in the matter of any plans that our own disobedience may oblige him to re-form for us as here for the hosts of Israel!

III. The Thirty-eight Years' Wandering (chs. 15-19).

The five chapters that follow (15-19) span the thirty-eight years of penal wandering in the great and terrible wilderness of Paran, which is yet called by the Arabs of the peninsula "the wandering" and across which run two caravan routes that are lined by the bones of the camels that have died on the weary journey. The headquarters of the camp through this long period seems to have been Kadesh-Barnea. Few incidents of this long period are given in the narrative, but these are very significant, one of them particularly: the rebellion of Korah, of the tribe of Levi, but not of the priestly part of it. He was jealous because of the fact that Aaron's line held the priesthood while his, with many others, were subordinate assistants. He called in another discontented

group, the Reubenites, who were jealous because Judah had been given preeminence over all other tribes, even over Reuben, the first-born of Jacob. It mattered not that all was by divine appointment. They charged that Moses and Aaron took too much upon them. God answered their rebellion by the miraculous and summary death of the rebels and showed the priesthood to be divinely established in the family of Aaron when his rod was made to bud and blossom and bare ripe almonds, once more sharply distinguishing between the tribe of Levi and the other tribes of Israel and between the priestly Levites, who were descended from Aaron, and the non-priestly Levites, who were descended from all others of the line, a distinction that was henceforth to be unquestioned.

The records of this period in the wandering have been spoken of as brief and yet significant. The omissions in the narrative are equally impressive. Through these thirty-eight years of wandering and hardship the many thousands died who were twenty years old and upward. Plagues and war carried off many; the swift or slow approach of death by natural means all through the camp cut down the other thousands, so that when the next stage of the march was undertaken but a chosen few were living of those who had their golden opportunity to make immediate conquest of the land and refused it. By scores of thousands they died on the battlefield or in their tents, each going to that bourne from which no traveler returns. The Ninetieth Psalm, which Maclaren has characterized as "preaching man's mortality in immortal words," was either written in this period or based in large part upon it. As the dead were borne out in a seemingly endless procession to silent homes beyond the camp the sensitive soul of Moses spoke forth the words that express so vividly the work of the grim reaper as he cuts down all within his path, and the comfort of the one refuge for the souls of men:

"Lord thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations."

We shall not have missed the lesson of this period if this psalm shall remind us of our mortality and shall teach us so to

number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. We shall gain more than gold if we can make our frailty cry out for us to God's lovingkindness. We shall be rewarded with much fine gold if it shall bring us to place God's work and glory and favor first in life, for this done we can ask in all confidence:

"And establish thou the work of our hands upon us;
Yea, the work of our hands, establish thou it."

IV. *The March to Moab* (chs. 20-21).

The fourth division of the book shows Israel on the march to Moab. The fortieth year out of Egypt was just beginning. Miriam died at Kadesh-Barnea as the march to Moab was in preparation. The people murmured for want of water and Moses and Aaron smote the rock but failing to honor God in the transaction ("Shall we bring you forth water out of this rock?" 20:10) were denied entrance to the promised land. Edom refused to grant a passage through its territory though Israel promised to keep to the royal highway and pay even for water along the road. The dramatic death of Aaron finds record next. Clad in the full robes of the high priesthood this first high priest ascends Mt. Hor with his brother, both old men now, and with Aaron's son Eleazar; the robes are stripped from the father and placed upon the son; the aged man is smitten and dies and Moses and the new high priest descend the mount in the presence of the people. It is an impressive fact that within one year, the fortieth out of Egypt, all three of this family died: Miriam at Kadesh-Barnea in the first month, Aaron four months later at Mt. Hor, and Moses on Nebo as the year was ending.

Chapter twenty-one of Numbers is one of the most stirring in the book. Forced to go around Edom instead of going through it, the host skirted the eastern arm of the Red Sea and in a section infested to this day by deadly serpents the brazen serpent was uplifted that they who looked might live.

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life." (John 3:14, A. R. V.)

The victories over Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, far to the north, gave Israel possession of a great part of their promised territory east of the Jordan. The conquest of the remainder was soon to come.

This chapter contains three poems, one of which is the exquisite "Song of the Well" (21:17-18):

"Then sang Israel this song:
Spring up, O well; sing ye unto it:
The well which the princes digged,
Which the nobles of the people delved,
With the scepter and with their staves."

It spoke well for the future that men in high station could put their hands to work. Necessity levels many a distinction social and otherwise. Millionaires were in the bread-line at Dayton. The butler and coachman march and camp with the gentry and nobility on battle-torn Europe to-day.

V. *On the Steppes of Moab* (chs. 22-36).

The fifth and last division of the book of Numbers sketches events on the steppes of Moab. Chapters 22, 23 and 24 are excelled in interest by few sections of the Pentateuch. They portray for us the part Balaam played at a very important stage in the history of the chosen people. In his person there enters one of the strangest characters of history. Living near the ancient home of Abraham on the upper Euphrates and in Pethor, supposed by some to have been a center of Oriental magic, Balaam had learned of the true God, yet plied his trade as a sorcerer (24:1). The caravans that traveled constantly between Egypt and Sinai and the Mesopotamian country no doubt brought to all the country between the rivers the news of the wonders God had wrought for Israel. Balaam doubtless knew all this and feared the power that made it possible—yet coveted the money and emoluments offered by Balak, king of Moab, and wished to extend his own reputation far and wide as a man whose counsel and help even kings were seeking. Hence his temporizing. Balaam wanted in his heart to

go. God, without approving it (22:20-22, 32-35), permitted it conditionally (vs. 20), and covetous though Balaam was, God made him for the time being what he had pretended all the while to be: the medium of revelation. There were three heights from which Balaam prophesied: Bamoth-Baal, Pisgah and Peor. Seven altars were built on each height. A bullock and a ram were offered on each altar. Balaam uttered four parables or prophecies, each a blessing on Israel and each marking an advance. The first (23:7-10) predicted for Israel isolation and numbers; the second (23:18-24), strength and victory; the third (24:3-9), wide extension, supreme exaltation and resistless dominion; the fourth (24:15-24), the distant, all-subduing kingdom of the Messiah. "Balaam," says Chalmers, "is made the involuntary instrument of further revelations, and what he now utters when the Spirit of God comes upon him (24:2) is in the very highest style and strain of lofty inspiration. We cannot fix on any portion of Scripture that bears a nobler or more sustained elevation than these effusions poured forth by Balaam from the mountains as he looked down on the tents of Israel stretched out in full and far perspective before him." Take, for example, these passages:

"For from the tops of the rocks I see him
And from the hills I behold him:
Lo, it is a people that dwelleth alone
And shall not be reckoned among the nations." (23:9.)

"God is not a man, that he should lie,
Neither the son of man, that he should repent:
Hath he said and will he not do it?
Or hath he spoken and will he not make it good?" (23:19, A. R. V.)

"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not nigh:
There shall come forth a star out of Jacob
And a scepter shall rise out of Israel
And shall smite through the corners of Moab
And break down all the sons of tumult." (24:17, A. R. V.)

Balak throughout makes five requests—three times to curse Israel (22:6 and 17 and 23:13); then, as blessings become more emphatic, neither to curse nor to bless (23:25); then for Balaam to return home (24:11).

The real Balaam is shown in his counselling Midian and Moab to draw Israel into licentious idolatry and thus provoke their destruction by Jehovah (25:1-6 and 31:16). He was killed in battle with the Midianites, his counsel proving, like that of many another opposing God, his own undoing. What wonder that the Scriptures hold him up to scorn as a money-loving prophet, for sale to the highest bidder?

Lessons of practical value speak out in quick succession from these pages that portray the career of Balaam. God sometimes, when our hearts are stubborn, permits in our lives what He does not approve. He may give us our request but send leanness to our souls. There is held up before us here the type of the double-minded man who is unstable in all his ways. We see the danger of temporizing. We see the futility and folly of opposing God. We see the peril and the end of worldly ambition. We see the possible disaster that may come from fighting against our better nature and of sinning against our convictions. We see the sequence of sin and, as one of my students expressed it when we were studying this character, we see "the final perseverance of the sinner."

"The princes of Midian," says Maclaren, "fall before the swift rush of Israel. And—sad, strange company!—among them is he who saw from afar 'the Scepter arise out of Israel and the Star from Jacob'; he who longed to 'die the death of the righteous.' The onset of the avenging host, with the 'shout of a king' in their midst; the terror of the flight, the riot of havoc and bloodshed, and, finally, the quick thrust of the sharp Israelitish sword in some strong hand, and the gray hairs all dabbled in blood—these were what the man came to who had once breathed the honest desire, 'Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!'"

Wishing without willing is fruitless; willing without trying, by grace, to be what we resolve to be will write failure on any life. In knowledge of God plus loving obedience to Him is our only safety, our true success.

For the double purpose of war and allotment of the land of Canaan another census was taken (ch. 26). It showed 601,730 of military age, as against 603,550 when Israel started out from Sinai thirty-eight years before, a difference of nearly 2,000 souls. Was warfare the cause of such great losses?

Or pestilence? Or outright punishment by death? Doubtless all contributed to make so startling the losses God predicted.

The remaining chapters of the book may be barely touched upon. Directions are given for the allotment of the land and Joshua is appointed and consecrated the military successor of Moses (chs. 26 and 27). Regulations are given respecting offerings and vows (chs. 28-30). Midian is all but exterminated in battle (ch. 31). Reuben, Gad and half Manasseh are granted territory east of the Jordan provided they first go over armed before their brethren and take part in the conquest of the land beyond the Jordan (ch. 32; 34:14). Moses writes out a list of the encampments of Israel, fifty-eight stations from Rameses to the plains opposite Jericho (ch. 33). The future territorial lines of Israel are traced (34:1-12), a territory of which Israel actually occupied only about one-third. Further directions are given as to cities of refuge (ch. 35), guaranteeing a fair trial and proper protection to a homicide, and laws are given providing against the alienation of an inheritance from one tribe to another (ch. 36) by decreeing that Israelites should marry within their own tribe.

The average span of human life is said to be about thirty-three years. This book covers but little more than that length of time. Unfortunately it resembles human life in other ways beside. Extensive preparations, high hopes, marching, murmuring, sometimes outright disobedience to known duty, passing through cloud and ever in arm's length of death, smitten by sin—but why attempt to finish the picture? It is all too familiar. But, as in life, so here we see the patience of God, his grace and love extended still to those who are all unworthy of it, glimpses of nobleness, brave deeds for God, and by His grace the brighter future. Praise be to the gracious Christ who can and will—if we will—take up this weak, sinful, sinning human nature, make it victorious and even noble, and present it faultless before even the presence of his glory with exceeding joy!