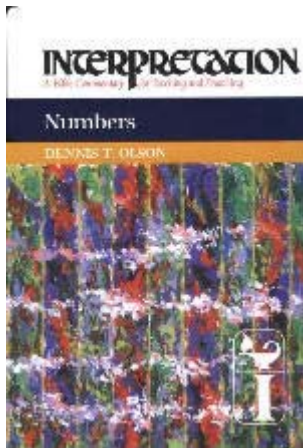


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Olson, Dennis T.

Numbers

Interpretation Bible Commentary

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996. Pp. xii + 196,
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As is explained in the series editors' preface (p. v), the purpose of commentaries in the Westminster John Knox Interpretation Series is to replace neither "the historical critical commentary" nor "homiletical aids to preaching. The purpose of this series is rather to provide a third kind of resource, a commentary which presents the integrated result of historical and theological work with the biblical text." In his own preface (p. vii) Dennis Olson explains that his goal is "to interpret the literary and theological structures and movements of Numbers in the hope that they may inform and excite the theological imagination of preachers, teachers and students of Scripture in the context of the contemporary church." What is in store for the reader is fully laid out in the opening sentence of the author's preface, in which he states, "My own wilderness journey with the book of Numbers began in a 1982 graduate seminar on Numbers taught by Brevard Childs at Yale University." In other words, Olson suggests, the journey about two millennia ago from Africa to Palestine through an inhospitable desert of sixty myriads of newly emancipated slaves, only two of whom would survive the journey, is to be compared with life as a graduate student at Yale University in 1982!

Unlike some of the more widely read books of Hebrew Scripture such as Genesis and Deuteronomy, Samuel and Kings--each of which, by and large, tells a story with a beginning and a middle and an end-- Numbers appears to most contemporary readers to be aptly described as the junk room of the OT. Olson (p. 101) demonstrates that Numbers 15, which looks like the veritable junk room of the book of Numbers, is "an artfully designed treatise of laws and narrative echoes." What Olson does so masterfully in

analyzing the content of Numbers 15 and its literary and theological connections to Numbers 1-14 and to Numbers 16-36 he does equally well throughout the book-- demonstrating again and again that each and every pericope of Numbers, be it the multiple narratives of rebellion against Moses and against God, the ordeal of the suspected adulteress (Numbers 5), or the red heifer rite for ritual purification from corpse uncleanness (Numbers 19), points in its own way to a purely spiritual message known also from the Israelite prophets, from the Gospels, from the epistles of Paul, from the fathers of the Church, from the Jewish rabbis of late antiquity and the Hebrew exegetes of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries CE. In fact, as Olson points out repeatedly, Jesus, Paul, and the rabbis derived many spiritual lessons from the minutiae of Numbers. So too, with Olson's help, can the modern reader derive much spiritual food from the fourth book of the Bible, notwithstanding its outward appearance as a veritable wasteland.

In presenting this kind of a commentary Olson has not only rendered valuable service to clergy and lay, he has also prepared a veritable highway in the wilderness for biblical scholars, whose concern to say something new and significant about some small matter often leaves them at a loss as to what to make of larger structures such as that presented by the book of Numbers.

Olson demonstrates familiarity with a wide variety of contributions to the exegesis of Numbers produced over almost two millennia. He shows that he is thoroughly grounded in Semitic philology, the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis, feminist biblical exegesis of the last quarter of the twentieth century, as well as the anthropological approach to the purity laws of the Pentateuch associated with Mary Douglas. He takes great pains to enrich the life of the church with the findings of Jewish exegetes, ancient, medieval, and contemporary.

Ultimately, however, Olson's commentary, like those of the church fathers and like the *midrash* of the ancient and medieval rabbis (and like many a sermon preached by clergy and laity in a typical Christian or Jewish house of worship) is essentially allegorical. For example, in Olson's reading, Numbers' account of the Israelites' traversing the wilderness should help postmodern people traverse today's spiritual wilderness (p. 2). Precisely because Olson reads the Bible allegorically, he is able continually to avoid confronting the tremendous human tragedy portrayed in Numbers: a band of slaves is led out of Egypt into the desert by a charismatic leader in the name of an unseen deity. Vast numbers of this band are struck down by thirst, hunger, serpents, civil war, and the armies of other nations who do not share Israel's vision of Canaan as "the land of Israel." Only two of the original party survive: Caleb and Joshua. Olson's neo-allegory shares with the so-called historical commentaries the failure to come to terms with the possible meaning of Scripture's portraying more than forty years of human tragedy as the victorious march from slavery in a strange land to freedom in the Promised Land. Olson summarizes quite accurately the common thread that runs through the historical

commentaries: the picture of some forty years of almost unmitigated tragedy portrayed in Numbers can be ignored because that tragedy never took place: "The diverse materials in Numbers were shaped and developed through many different periods and social situations, ranging from the earliest to the latest times in Israel's history" (p. 3).

By showing the inability of both historical exegesis and Olson's neo-allegory to confront the reality of human tragedy portrayed not only in the pages of Scripture but also in many an ancient Egyptian painting and Assyrian bas relief, Olson, has, possibly, prepared the way for a truly postmodern exegesis, which will read the story line with all its blood and guts and try to understand what, if any, meaning can be found for people who believe in a loving God, who is our Father and our Mother, in these tales of terror repeated again and again in our own era and viewed in living color on our television screens.