

Torah P6

Numbers - Q&R

Podcast Date: April 5, 2017

(45.50)

Speakers in the audio file:

Jon Collins

Tim Mackie

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Jon: Hey, this is Jon at The Bible Project. This summer, we've been releasing a series that was originally aired on our YouTube channel on a live stream. We've got requests to take that audio and put it on a podcast, so we're doing just that.

In this episode, Tim and I, host a Q&R, question in response on the book of Numbers. The book of Numbers is a wild ride in the Old Testament. It documents Israel's journey through the wilderness after they were rescued from Egypt. They're on their way to the promised land if they could just get their act together.

Tim and I discussed questions about the bronze snake, the pagan sorcerer, Balaam, and the difference in the Old Testament between being sinful and being unclean. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

So this is the book of Numbers. Five sections.

Tim: Five sections overall. The book is one big journey and there are three collections of stories. One around Mount Sinai at first, where Israel's ending their one year stay.

Jon: They've been here for a year.

Tim: A year.

Jon: In a desert under a mountain, hanging out, getting the law, that's a long backpacking trip. It's a long camping trip.

Tim: It is. They get organized. The ordering of the camps it's all cool. They take a census.

Jon: If I was there for a year, at that point, I'd probably be like, "You know what? This might just be home. I might just be chilling here for the rest of my life.

Tim: It's a pretty desolate part of the world.

Jon: You will be anxious to get out of there.

Tim: Yeah. It's not a great place to stay.

Jon: Numbers actually means in the wilderness.

Tim: That's right. The book of Numbers is its Greek name and it refers to the two censuses. There's one at the beginning, there's one at the end of the book The Hebrew name which is much older is Bəmidbar, "in the wilderness." So they begin in the wilderness, they end in the wilderness.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

The book has two travel sections that frame the center which is a bunch of tragic stories that also take place in the wilderness.

Jon: Right here?

Tim: Yeah. So different places of the wilderness but it's all on this long journey.

Jon: So there's like five sections in Sinai and then they travel for a while. There's story is while they traveled. Then are in Paran that's where the spy thing happens, and stuff and that's somewhere in the wilderness there. Then they travel again, and then they get to the plains of Moab which is right before they get to the Jordan River.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: That's the structure of the book. Lots of really interesting stories in here which we'll jump into with questions I suppose.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Let's do that.

Tim: There were a bunch of questions about a story that takes place right here after the second travel narrative. The scene shifts to a strange set of stories about a guy named Balaam and then the king of Moab Balak. Balak hires Balaam as a sorcerer to pronounce curses on the nation of Israel, because, like Pharaoh, he's freaked out that this large people group—

[crosstalk 00:03:21]

Jon: Yes. This large group of people are coming through. Do you think like, they were after his land, but what does he [inaudible 00:03:28]? So he hires this dude to try to take them down. So strategy one might be, "Let's go just fight them." But a better thing to do is hire some dude so God will just curse him.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: So he's just like a guy for hire.

Tim: Yeah. Actually, here's what's interesting. You guys, Google...We'll have to spell it. In the late 60s in the modern country of Jordan, I think it was something like a building was getting torn down or something, but they discovered this ancient set of structures that went back to the Israelite time period, and they found these texts that are called the Deir Allah texts. D-E-I-R, Dier, and then Allah texts. D-E-I-R, A-L-L-A-H.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Then if you google "Deir Allah and Balaam," you'll get it. They discovered these ancient texts that mentioned Balaam. It's actually a record of him prophesying in the name of God Most High.

Anyways, what these tests showed us is that Balaam was a well-known sorcerer where in the ancient world, and Israelites were the only people who knew about him in their texts.

Jon: This guy was a legend.

Tim: Yeah, kind of the way Nostradamus is kind of a well-known as a predictive.

Jon: So you'd be like, "Oh, Balaam. I know about that guy. They got that guy?"

Tim: Yeah, totally. When we read about Balaam, we should all be going like, "Oh, not good."

Jon: I like how we drew him here. I'll zoom in on him. If you go to my screen again, he's not...if you google image search "Balaam," you get like little chubby guys on donkeys. He's so cute. And you're like, "Oh, that guy. Balaam is so cute." And his donkey talks to him. So like, "This guy, he curses people for a living." He's probably pretty gnarly.

Tim: Yes, he is. We have a handful of questions about Balaam, so I just want to hit them because they raised different questions about Balaam. One is Arelia D [SP] who you always ask perceptive, very good questions. Arelia, your down yonder here, and you ask the question here. "It seems like Balaam has a relationship with or an understanding of the God of Israel, but is this possible for a pagan sorcerer?" That's a really good question. Apparently—

Jon: Somehow he has word of it.

Tim: Like almost every story that's in the Torah, there are questions that we come with or questions that the story raises that it doesn't attempt to answer. And that's one of them, is how does this pagan ancient sorcerer actually connect to the God of Israel and the God of Israel reveals things to him.

I think from the Israelite author's point of view, it's a way of saying, the God of Israel isn't just a tribal God. He's the creator of all and so He can reveal Himself to anybody. And he does so to Balaam.

Jon: So maybe he got word somehow or maybe God told him somehow. We can conjecture. But we're not talking about like...he doesn't live in some so crazy, faraway place.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

If you were just going to hike to Moab from Sinai, let's say, it probably should just take a week, right, on foot?

Tim: But what's interesting, the Israelites haven't been in the land, just the patriarchs wandering around. So the question is, how does he even know about Yahweh, the God of Israel. The story—

Jon: Let's just say someone who was at Mount Sinai takes off and goes, "I'm just going to explore it myself." And he starts telling them the stories. I mean, whatever.

Tim: We do know when the Israelites get to Jericho, Rahab is in the city and she says, "All the Canaanites we've heard about what your God did for you." And so, the God of Israel's reputation was spreading. We know that. But this is more. This is a pagan sorcerer who can do powerful things. His words have power and he connects them to the God of Israel.

So I'm just affirming it's bizarre. And I think the story assumes and knows that it is bizarre, that's why it's telling the story is because it's remarkable. Then specifically, that God, even though this is a powerful sorcerer in the ancient world, actually he's just a servant of the God of Israel. And he can only say what the God of Israel wants him to say.

Jon: So it takes the most powerful sorcerer in the ancient world and put them in the story, and what does he do? He has to do what the God wants.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: And all he wants is to help these guys out even though they've been rumblings through the wilderness the whole time.

Tim: Up to this point, Israel the nation has been behaving like a toddler on a temper tantrum.

Jon: I think I would if I spent 40 years in a desert.

Tim: That's true. But despite what they're doing, God wants to bless His people. So your question is a good one Arelia. Kickpuncher3000, who we now know is Christy Short, you put the question this way. It's a similar type of question. But you asked, "God told Balaam not to curse the Israelites. Does this mean that Balaam really had the power to bless or curse those who he wished? If so, how?"

The story about Balaam, again, assumes that he's a powerful sorcerer, who the story turns out to show us is really not powerful compared to Yahweh the God of Israel. So did he really have power to curse? From the perception of the Israelites, totally. And

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

then, from the perception of Balaam, absolutely. Did he actually have these powers? Again, the story doesn't give us most of the answers that we want.

Jon: But in that time period—

Tim: He was well-known as a powerful sorcerer.

Jon: And people would have totally been like, "Yeah, of course." There wouldn't have been doubt about that

Tim: That's right. That's why the king of Moab goes to—

Jon: Gives them money to...Yeah.

Tim: It raises all other theological questions that we have.

Jon: Right. Can people curse, well, tap into some power and...?

Tim: Which the story I think is saying, "No, everybody's subservient to the God of Israel, and they are power is nothing compared to God's." That's the point. There are more puzzles about Balaam.

There was a first question. Garen Forsythe. I don't think we've heard from Garen before.

Jon: Hi Garen.

Tim: Hi man. "In the video, we talked about, in the third Balaam speech, we talked about how Balaam predicted the king who will bless all nations. Does Balaam talk about that blessing? Does he talk about that coming king? There's only a language about smashing the nations. Is there something in the Hebrew texts that we don't see?" Great question.

The king of Moab hires him, he tries to get him to curse Israel three times and it doesn't work. Then, Balaam goes on with the fourth poem, and then some others after that. In the second poem, he mentions how God brought Israel as a nation up out of Egypt. He says, "God is for Israel like the horns of a wild ox." This is a cool metaphor.

But then in the third poem, he talks about, you'll see it here, it's in chapter 24, he talks about how a king in exalted kingdom is going to come out of Israel. Then he uses the same words he used about the nation in the third poem and applies them to this king in the fourth poem about how God's going to bring this king on his own

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Exodus and deliver this king out of Egypt. And God will be for this king like the horns of wild ox, and that this king will defeat all of his enemies and so on.

Then at the very end of that poem, there is Balaam talking, or the author of the Pentateuch attaches a little Post-it Note, a little editorial Post-it Note, I think, where he quotes from poem of Judah blessing at the end of Book of Genesis and attaches it here about this king being like a lion. Then after that, there's a quotation from God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.

So I think the author of the Pentateuch is connecting this king that Balaam mentions to the king promised to come from the line of Judah in Genesis 49, connected to God's plan to bless all nations through Abraham's family in Genesis 12.

Then there's another poem that goes on after that, his fourth poem and he calls this king the star that will come out of Jacob, a scepter coming out of Egypt, and he's going to be victorious over all of Israel's enemies and so on.

Jon: What's the purpose of the lion? That's from Cain and Abel, "sin is crouching at your door?"

Tim: The lion is from Jacob's blessing of the tribe of Judah at the end of the book of Genesis.

Jon: The people rise like a lioness? No.

Tim: That's right. It's at the end of Numbers 24.

Jon: This is Numbers 24:9. "Like a lion, they crouch and lie down, like a lioness who dares to rouse them."

Tim: Yeah, it's a quotation.

Jon: So it's the lion of Judah?

Tim: Yeah, totally. I think the author of Pentateuch in these poems is connecting us back up to the main themes of the Torah.

Jon: So here's Balaam, he hasn't been attached to this whole thing. He's heard somehow. And in his what you call a prayer, his incantation or whatever it is, he starts basically prophesying about this Messiah that we've learned about in very cryptic ways. The Lion of Judah.

Tim: The seed of the woman who is going to crush the snake.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Jon: And then the promise to Abraham. - that's through him all the world will be blessed. So in his incantation are all of these things.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: So cool that Balaam is basically prophesying about Jesus.

Tim: From the king of Moab point of view, he hired Balaam to curse his enemies. What Balaam ends up doing is pronouncing Moab's downfall because of the king that will come forth from Israel. Then that king, the author connects back to all of these key messianic promises from earlier in the book.

The poems of Balaam are absolutely crucial for understanding the message and main themes of the Torah. And they come from the most unlikely place.

Jon: Which is, I guess, fairly typical about how the Bible works.

Tim: That's typical for the Torah as a whole. Most of the main characters are big screw ups. Anyway, the Balaam stories. Thanks for your good questions about Balaam. They are odd stories, but they're super, super important.

Jon: Cool. That's Balaam. What other questions?

Tim: Oh, man, there's lots of good questions. Ben Brown, you had a good question. I think you've asked a question before. "There is a story here in chapter 20—it's in the second wilderness section—about the people grumbling and then God send snakes. It's the snake attacks. It's very odd. And so, God tells Moses to make a bronze snake on a pole. And then you ask, "Could you speak more about that?"

Jon: What's the purpose of the bronze snake?

Tim: The purpose is it's the image of the thing that's killing them. Then this idol snake statue, they look to it and then—

Jon: If they had been bitten, they're going to be fine.

Tim: That's right, God grants them healing and life. It's very odd.

Jon: Right, very odd. If I went to church and there was the guy with a bronze snake and he was like, "Look at this, and you're going to be better." I'm going to be like, "I don't want to hear that." That's weird. It's getting a little strange.

Tim: Super strange.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Jon: But in that time, what would I have been experiencing if I saw Moses doing this and I'm an Israelite? I wouldn't have been like, "That's weird."

Tim: It's not a representation of God because they did that once on Mount Sinai with a golden calf thing and that didn't go well for them. So, it's clearly, like God tells Moses, "Make a bronze symbolic representation of the animal that's out there biting people." The symbol is a paradox. It's a symbol of His judgment.

When you pull the story out of context, you're like, "Oh, God's really a jerk here." But dude, just read the stories leading up to it. God's been very patient with His people. So the snakes come as a form of His judgment.

And then what God gives as a way of escape, or a way to take refuge from His judgment is a symbol of the judgment itself. And so, paradoxically, they look to this symbol of God's judgment, and that is the thing, that's the vehicle of Him granting them life again. The story is very strange, but at the center of it is a symbol that at the same time is a symbol of God's judgment, and of God's grace and life that He wants to give to His people.

Ben, you asked, "Could you speak more about God commanding Moses to create a bronze snake? Why does God give Moses an idol for the people to look at?" I have no idea, and neither does anybody else. The story is just there.

We do know that this snake statue stuck around in Israel because one of the later kings of Israel ends up digging it out of the archives and then a bunch of Israelites starts to give offerings to it.

Jon: Which wasn't their point.

Tim: Definitely not the point. Then the last thing to tie it up though is it is a strange story but Jesus paid attention to the story when you read the book of Numbers. In John chapter 3, where he starts talking about how he's going to die so that others can have life—this is in his conversation with Nicodemus—he brings up the story. He says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, he will be lifted up so that others might have life."

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' being lifted up is all pointing forward to his being lifted up and nailed on the cross.

Jon: So Jesus read the story and he said, "Oh, that story is about me."

Tim: Yes, totally. Jesus reads a story about a strange story, a strange way that God rescues His people because the way that He rescues them is itself a symbol of His judgment

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

on them. And that's precisely how Jesus understood what was happening on the cross.

Jon: That God's judgment was coming, that also in the same time was His way to save.

Tim: That's right? It's a different image but the same idea of the Last Supper - Passover. So he's putting himself in the blood of the Passover lamb, my body and my blood. So his death is going to become a source of life. Jesus found this strange story of this bronze snake as a helpful image to unpack what his coming death was all about.

Jon: Other prophets would never have done that kind of move, right? Like go, "Oh, actually, that story in the Torah, that was about me." Any other prophet saying that?

Tim: Well, I mean, there were definitely other people on the scene claiming that they were the messianic king. Jesus is the only Jewish person we know of who ever mentioned the story of the bronze snake as explaining something about themselves and what they're doing. It's very unique.

Jon: It seems like the way he views all these scriptures and how he does that with Isaiah and everything's, he's just like, it's all about him, and in a way that people hadn't been thinking about.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Jesus walks on into a scene where people have lots of hopes and expectations, many of them are based on the scriptures. But then Jesus also used a lot of things in the scriptures to explain himself that blew people's categories. And this was one of them.

So I agree with you, Ben, it's a very odd story, but it has a surprising connection to Jesus that he thought the story was significant. It's a great question. He has a good question⁹.

Areliya, you asked a cool question that I think opens up a cool idea about the book of Numbers.

Jon: Already done one of her questions.

Tim: Areliya, you ask, "Are you guys able to shed some light on The Book of the Wars of the Lord mentioned in Numbers chapter 21? Is this a book that was considered part of the Hebrew canon?" If you're not familiar, this is in a story right here in the travel section, and it's a story of one of the battles Israel fights as it starts to encounter Canaanite people groups.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Then there's a line in the story about where they're traveling, and then it says, "As it says in The Book of the Wars of the Lord..." So the author of the Pentateuch has incorporated material from a source here that he names. Fascinating.

Jon: Which we don't have.

Tim: Yeah. The Book of the Wars of the Lord is mentioned in a couple other places. It's mentioned once in the book of Joshua. Off the top my head, I know Joshua. I think it's mentioned somewhere in one of the books of Samuel. But I forget.

Here's what it opens up for us, that Moses certainly played a role in the literary production of the Torah. He's mentioned as writing numerous times in the Torah. However, Moses only is born in the story of the Torah by the time you are already 52 chapters in the Torah.

So already, we're talking about a whole bunch of material that Moses may have framed or composed but he's not responsible for it. Which then opens up the question that don't think of the Torah as a document that somebody sat down and wrote, think of the Torah as a museum exhibit that someone has architected and collected materials from different places and different times and different sources and then arranged it as a meaningful experience for you to walk through.

Jon: One of the things they had access to was Wars of the Lord.

Tim: One of these sources is called "The Book of the Wars of the Lord."

Jon: We also know that another source potentially was when Moses wrote down all of their covenant commandments, put it in the arch of the covenant. That was something that we don't have, but that was a source.

Tim: That's exactly right. There are numerous other clues within the Torah itself that Moses wasn't the only contributor to the Torah. The best example is in a place you never expected. In the Genesis, there's the genealogy of Esau in Genesis 36, and it says, "Here's a list of Edomite kings, this was before any of the kings of Israel reigned in the land. I mean, the genealogy straight up tells you it comes from a time way after Moses.

Jon: Because he knows they had kings?

Tim: Because it's assuming that at a time when the kings of Israel have been around for a long time. So when the prophets look back to the Torah, they viewed Moses as a key author. They didn't view Moses as the only author. In Daniel chapter 9, and

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Zachariah chapter 7, they view the Torah as coming from just they say Moses and the prophets.

So The Book of the Wars of the Lord, it was an archive document that documented Israel's journey through the wilderness. It was never a part of the Bible, but it was a source for some of the material that ended up in some of the books of the Bible.

Jon: We do want to go into more depth on how the Bible was made - this was a question about canon, and we could talk for a long time about that. But we want to make a series. We want to do something with that. I think that will be really helpful. It's been helpful for me, and I'm still in the thick of it trying to learn.

Tim: There's so much misinformation on Netflix or YouTube or whatever about the history of the making of the Bible. And it's really astounding because there's so much public accessible information about where the Bible came from.

It bothers some people. If your assumption is the Bible dropped out of heaven, then that history might be troubling to you and force you to rethink some things. But if you hold the orthodoxy view about the Bible that it's a divine and human book, then we can trace much of that human history. And it's fascinating, I think.

Jon: David Charlton says, The Bible being compiled as messy and then people are messy, and when God deals with us, He gets involved in... It's not clean. When he becomes human.

Tim: The story of Jesus is anything but simple or clean. Yeah, that's exactly right. So good question Arelia D.

Jon: That's number two for Arelia. She should win a prize.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Ben Brown. Oh, Ben Brown, you had a second question but it was a good one and so we're going to bring it up. You ask, "In numbers, what does it mean to bless. I'm thinking of the priestly blessing in Numbers and also the blessing cursing of Balaam. What happens when priests or people bless the people?"

That's a great question. That really gets us into a core theme of the entire Torah, which is about God's desire to bless people. Because that idea appears on page 1 of the Bible. When God makes humans and appoints them as His image bearers, is the first thing God does to humans in the Bible is blessed them. We've talked about this before.

Jon: Yeah, I'm trying to remember.

Tim: It's one of these Bible religious words that you can say—

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Jon: We do use when people sneeze.

Tim: Yeah. We have "blessed you." Some people use it in the passive. "I was so blessed."

Jon: Oh, that's true. But that's a Christian thing to say.

Tim: Right. It's like Christianese. But what were you saying? Bless you?

Jon: Oh, just want you to know where that comes from, is when you sneeze—this might be total imagined—but when you sneeze, people thought your soul was escaping. And so you say "Bless you" to kind of get it back in. So when you say "bless you" to someone, you're trying to like stuff their soul back into their mouth.

Tim: Wow, I've never heard that before.

Jon: I didn't just make it up but it might not be true.

Tim: In German, you say, "Gesundheit." Good health.

Jon: Well, anyway, so blessing. When you say "I feel blessed" you just mean, I feel hooked up.

Tim: I got the hookup.

Jon: Yeah, things are going well.

Tim: Or that really blessed me when you like—

Jon: It made me feel good.

Tim: It's interesting.

Jon: Or if you're going to give someone money or something, it's like really a blessing.

Tim: All right, now we're more in the ballpark here.

Jon: Here's a \$20, I hope that's a blessing.

Tim: So God blesses the humans in the form of giving them a world to be responsible for. What He tells them is to be fruitful and multiply, to rule the earth and subdue it, and harness its resources and make it go somewhere. So blessing has to do with the gift that God gives to people. It's often connected with abundance.

In the book of Genesis, at the end of the book, Jacob predicts blessings on the tribe of Joseph. And it's like, "Blessings in your barn, and in your family and on your

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

animals." So it's a sign of abundance. Then it becomes a way for you to bless someone - to pray a blessing.

Like in the book of Numbers, what the priests do is they pray a blessing. And it's the famous blessing: "May the Lord bless you, may he keep you may cause his face to shine upon you, may he show you favor, may he lift his countenance upon you and give you peace."

There what you were praying for is that God would show this person favor by giving them peace, harmony, and abundance in their lives. So blessing is the hookups.

Jon: It is the hookups.

Tim: It's the divine hookups. Then that word then comes into early Christianity, and then it becomes one of the main vocabulary items that Paul will use, for example, to describe the hookups that come when you put your trust and devotion in Jesus the Messiah. His opening line in Ephesians says, "Praise be to the God who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the Messiah."

Jon: He's spiritualizing it. Well, blessing was typically my harvest is awesome, lots of children.

Tim: Yeah. For Paul it's the presence of Jesus by means of the spirit you're being included in the covenant family of God's people, which is multi-ethnic, international, Jesus movement.

Jon: It's giving good things.

Tim: Yeah, totally.

Jon: Whether it's physical things or spiritual things.

Tim: That's right. But for Paul, it's not just spiritual, it's your life gets now rooted and transplanted into a new family - a local community of people who they're going to be your people. Paul's vision of the church it's your new family where you're taken care of and you learn how to be a new and different kind of human that's experiencing God's blessing.

It's a really profound way of actually telling the story of the whole Bible is blessing and curse. Blessing, loss of blessing, and then restoring the blessing. We should probably do a theme video on blessing now that I'm talking about it.

Jon: All right. Blessing theme video.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Tim: Make a note. Sometimes this is about how we come up with theme video ideas is as we're talking and like, "Yeah, we should add that to the list."

Jon: And we'll talk about how people sneeze out their soul.

Tim: Totally. Let's make a video about that one. Let's see. David Charlton, you're from the UK, regular. There's a well-known story in Numbers about Moses that it's kind of intense. Lots of people usually have questions about it.

Jon: Yeah, it doesn't make a lot of sense.

Tim: It's in chapter 20. Part of the culmination of Israel's rebellion in the wilderness, Moses has a moment of failing. Essentially what it is, is the people grumble, they're thirsty. The story is right. We even drew it and featured it right here.

They're thirsty and they rebel. God tells Moses to speak to a rock that the water would stream out of it and come to the people. What Moses says is he doesn't speak to the rock, he strikes it. Then what he says to the people is, "You rebels, must we—that is Aaron and I—bring water out of this rock for you?" And then he hits the rock twice, were told, and water comes out.

Then immediately God says to Moses, "You dishonored me, you didn't trust me."

Jon: I'll zoom into the area.

Tim: God says, "You didn't trust me, you didn't believe in me, therefore, you've dishonored me in the eyes of the people. So, Moses, you will suffer the same fate as the Exodus generation, and you don't get to enter the promised land."

And David Charlton, you ask, "It seems harsh. My question is about the rebellion of Moses. His decision to tap the rock rather than speak to it, is that all there is to it? It seems very harsh."

Jon: Yeah. Because the explanation that some people have then is—and I think I've heard from you—we can notice two things. One is God tells him to speak to the rock and he hits it with a staff.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: Secondly, he takes credit for it by saying, "We." That's why it's big and bold in our thing. That's it. I mean, he just made a couple of mistakes, right?

Tim: Yeah.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Jon: It's kind of like maybe he should have a dress rehearsal first so if he screws this up, stakes are pretty high to get the promised land or not. So yeah, is it too harsh? But the other question for me is, is the Bible...when the language is crafted, are they being this specific? Are we reading too much into these things?

Tim: Those little differences.

Jon: Yeah, little differences. Or was that just kind of like—

Tim: Because he has hit the rock before. There's a story in Exodus 16 and 17 where they're thirsty and so Moses hit the rock and draw water for them. So he's hit a rock before.

Jon: Yeah, and it worked out fine.

Tim: One, the language is crafted, and so those little differences in the story, they matter. They're not accidental. That Moses fulfills God's command but in a way that's not exactly the way that God commanded him to. This connects to a motif throughout the whole of the Torah, where you have characters, especially in the Abraham stories, where Abraham will do something God asked him to do but slightly differently, and then it ends up in ruin and disaster.

So he says, "Leave your father's household," but he takes his nephew with him, Lot. And then, Lot becomes this huge source of headache and a huge pain and causes all these problems to Abraham. It's huge. My point is that the stories already prepared us for when people don't obey God exactly what He said, things don't go well.

Jon: So that's the moral of the story; God tells you to do something, do it exactly.

Tim: I think that's one part of what's going on here. The other part is the fact that the narrator doesn't ever come and say, "And here's why Moses was disqualified to go into the promised land." The narrator has chosen to leave it ambiguous, which means the story leaves you puzzled and it leaves you much in the position of Moses himself. "I'm wondering why this happened."

And the way God evaluates is not by pointing to a specific behavior. He says, "You didn't have faith. You didn't believe in me." In that little line, "you didn't have faith to believe in me," Moses' behavior is mirroring what the Israelites did when they rejected going into the promised land because God's evaluation of the Israelites was "you didn't have faith and you didn't believe in me."

So Moses behavior is being paired with Israel's rebellion, and that's the connection that the story wants to make. There are lots of stories like this in the Torah—it's just

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

like Balaam—where they raise questions that we have that the story ultimately doesn't answer.

Jon: Where's the part where everyone else doesn't get to go into the promised land?

Tim: It's Numbers 13 and 14. So the spies come back, here's all the people. And they're like, "Let's go back to Egypt." They want to go back to Egypt.

Jon: And he's like, "All right. Your children will go in."

Tim: Yeah. God disqualify as a whole generation. And in Numbers 14, God describes that He sums it up because...

[crosstalk 00:37:38]

Jon: Is it supposed to be a parallel in a way?

Tim: Yeah. The author of the Torah has paralleled Moses' rebellion with Israel's rebellion by that keyword unbelief, or lack of faith. This is a big theme in the Torah because it connects all the way back to Abraham stories where God brought Abraham out in the middle of the night to look up at the stars. And Abraham's asking, like, "I don't have any kids, how am I ever going to become a nation?" And God says, "Look at the stars. If you can count them, that's how many kids, children, grandchildren you're going to have."

And we're told that Abraham believed in God. It's a rare word in the Torah, but when it occurs, it's very important. Abraham had every opportunity not to believe.

Jon: And by "believe" we just mean "he trusted."

Tim: He trusted God.

Jon: He was like, Okay, if that's what you say, that's going to happen."

Tim: He trusted God's promise. That's right. And so, he is contrasted in the Torah with the generation that experienced the Exodus, and they don't trust. Moses who was the...he was God's instrument in bringing about the Exodus, and even he didn't trust.

The Torah is a large scale contrast between Abraham and Moses and Israel and these portraits of faith and lack of faith. The Moses story is really important. There is still a mystery as to what exactly went on in his heart that God nailed him for it.

But the narrator is connecting him to a much larger theme and the Torah about faith and trust in God. Which is why Paul the Apostle made such a big deal about the

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

faith, trusting God theme in the Torah. In his letters to the Romans and Galatians, he was paying attention to this motif.

Jon: That's cool. Which kind of a theme. Let me write that one down.

Tim: What's that? Faith? Trust?

Jon: Yeah, faith. Belief.

Tim: Trust.

Jon: Trust.

Tim: Believe, faith.

Jon: We don't really have that one, do we?

Tim: We have a problem in English. We have too many words for this. We have "faith" as the noun. You can say, "I have faith." Then we have "belief."

Jon: But you only say about spiritual things. You don't say like, "I have faith in this chair."

Tim: That's true. "I don't have faith in you."

Jon: You have faith in people.

Tim: Which means you're trustworthy.

Jon: But you're having faith in a relational kind of abstract thing. You don't have faith in like [unintelligible 00:40:05].

Tim: Faith tends to refer to religious beliefs. You're a person of faith.

Jon: And in a relational thing.

Tim: Or character.

Jon: Character stuff. But you don't have you don't faith going over bridge. The bridge is going to not collapse. You just have trust.

Tim: Yeah, I trust the bridge. We use the word trust for that. Yeah, it's complicated. In Hebrew, it's simple. There's one word. At the base of all our various words, in Hebrew, it's one word.

Jon: What is the Hebrew word?

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Tim: Aman. It's the root of our word Amen.

Jon: Really?

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Just aman?

Tim: Aman is an adjective that means trustworthy. Trustworthy.

Jon: Why do you say at the end of the prayer?

Tim: True. True, that.

Jon: True that.

Tim: I think that's what it means.

Jon: Aman.

Tim: True that.

Jon: Wow. I need a theme video on that.

Tim: Andy Gray, you ask the question. "I would like a discussion on the difference between being ceremonially unclean and being sinful. What implication or direction can we learn from this today? This is related to Leviticus also, but right here in the early part of the book, there's all these things about ritual purity, and cleanness and uncleanness.

Jon: Watch the holiness video.

Tim: The holiness video answers it.

Jon: That will help you.

Tim: Basically, you become ritually impure or unclean if you're an Israelite through just a handful of things. It's either contact with dead bodies, diseased or reproductive fluids. This is a symbolic set of customs in Israel, where if you touch one of these, you can't go into God's presence. That's what it means to be unclean. It doesn't mean that you're sinful and a horrible person.

Jon: You didn't do something wrong.

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Tim: It just means you're marked with the symbols of death and so you can't have those symbols connected to you and go into the presence of the author of all life. That's wrong to cross that boundary line, but being ritually impure is not inherently sinful.

Jon: I think maybe I heard you say once this kind of like...Maybe it was you. I don't remember. But it's like, if you're going to meet the president of the United States you might take a bath first.

Tim: Yeah, that's a good point. Or you were aware your gardening clothes or the clothes like your project work clothes, you wouldn't wear those. You would wear something holy, which is unique. Something like that. Ritual impurity was a whole set of practices that the Israelites were to practice.

Jon: But if you're going to touch dead people, which is going to happen, it doesn't mean you did something wrong. It means you've got to chill out for a while and not go to the temple.

Tim: Correct. The only carry over we see of that into the New Testament is the language of purity gets then put as a map on to what we would call moral purity. That's why you'll find pure or impure, clean or unclean language not in the New Testament in Jesus or Paul, but connected to matters of like sex, and what you do with your money and greed, and so on. They'll use the word impurity to describe this.

There, they are using this language, mapping it on to their certain ways of behaving as a human, where you are associating yourself with death and destruction. And that's not good.

Jon: The same way that you would touch this dead body, be unclean, you can't go to the temple, now, he's using that as structure to say, "Cool, now that you understand that because you've been doing that for a while. You get that, we don't get that. But they got that." Now, in the same way, realize that when you are sexually impure, you are now in a space you shouldn't be like.

Tim: That's right. If you're saying you're following Jesus, and you're sleeping around, Paul would say that—

Jon: There's just too much of a problem going on.

Tim: That's right. You're acting impure and you are acting unclean. You're associating yourself with a death-dealing destructive behavior, and Jesus died to clean you from that.

Jon: Well, I think what's tough is he's using—

Torah P6 - Numbers - Q&R

Tim: Paul uses the clean and unclean language about morality.

Jon: He's using a practice that we're not familiar with, that's really hard for us to comprehend as a stage to talk about something we do understand. It's just confusing.

Tim: That's why we associate being impure with sinful because that's the way Paul uses the language.

Jon: I see.

Tim: That's not the way the language is used in Leviticus and Numbers. Isn't that interesting?

Jon: Okay, I think I get it.

Tim: All right guys. Have a great week. Thanks for supporting The Bible Project. You guys are awesome.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project. We're a nonprofit studio in Portland, Oregon, and we have lots of free resources on our website, thebibleproject.com. Thanks for being part of this with us.