

Numbers' Nine Nutty Nuggets

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One of my favorite cereals is called „Nutty Nuggets," made of wheat and barley. Here, however, I am thinking of "nutty" as crazy and eccentric, and of „nugget" as a small lump of information. Hence a „nutty nugget" is a bit of crazy information, a foolish notion, a crackbrained idea. Even a Roman Catholic publication, *God's Word Today* (September 2001; hereafter GWT), refers to various passages in Numbers as „strange," "offensive" "flawed," and „wrong-headed." Thus „nutty nuggets" include all kinds of weird stuff, strange stuff, and bizarre stuff, as we shall see.

Nutty Nugget Number 1: A Census of Paid Killers (1:1-3)

Numbers begins with the Lord (Yahweh) commanding Moses to take a census of all the males who are strong enough to fight in Israel's army. It's a census of paid killers who are to slaughter the Canaanites, the poor unfortunates who will be „bread" for the Israelites (14:9). Yahweh is a narrow, nationalistic war-god who fights with his troops and leads them to bloody victory in „holy wars," which should be called "unholy wars."

Nutty Nugget Number 2: The Wrong Recipe (3:14)

According to Numbers 3:1-4 and 26:61, the Lord killed two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, in the Sinai Desert when they used unacceptable fire in their offering to the Lord. Apparently the fire was unacceptable because the incense burned was offered in defiance of the Lord's formula for sweet-smelling incense (Exodus 30:34-38). Leviticus 10:2 tells us how the Lord killed Nadab and Abihu: „Suddenly the Lord sent fiery flames and burned them to death" (Contemporary English Version). What a horrible way to die, simply for not using the Lord's recipe for sweet-smelling incense. What kind of justice is that?

Nutty Nugget Number 3: A Bitter Ordeal (5:11-31)

Probably the most demeaning rite in the Bible is found in Numbers 5:11-31, the abominable ordeal of bitter water. A woman who is suspected of adultery by her husband must go into the tent of meeting and drink bitter water made of holy water plus dust from the tent floor. If the woman is guilty of adultery, the magic water makes her stomach swell up and her genitals shrink. If she is innocent, the holy beverage will not harm her, and she will be able to bear children to her suspicious husband.

But how about the husband? He was free from all blame, even if he caused his wife to go through this humiliating rite and his suspicions proved unfounded. The husband did not even have to justify his suspicion of his wife's unfaithfulness. And of course there was no corresponding rite by which the wife could test the faithfulness of her husband. After all, the important consideration was that the man should know who his own sons were, so that some other man's sons would not inherit his name and his property. That's not exactly egalitarian!

Nutty Nugget Number 4: The Lord's Short Fuse (Numbers 14:18 and passim)

The Lord is slow to anger" (Numbers 14:18; Exodus 34:6). Let's examine the Lord's track record in Numbers, which repeatedly tells us that the Lord loses his temper easily. He does have a short fuse! He's anything but slow to anger."

Numbers 11:1-3 reports that the Lord, when he heard the people complaining about their misfortunes, became so angry that he destroyed the outer edges of their camp with fire. The frightened people cried out to Moses, who prayed to the Lord and the fire abated. God is a hothead, but Moses has a cool head and calms God down, but not for long. Because the Israelites stood around their tents complaining, the anger of the Lord blazed hotly (11:10). Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people and he smote them with a very great plague while they were eating the quail the Lord himself had sent them (11:31 -35),

Later on (12:1-15), the Lord was angry again, this time with Miriam and Aaron because they criticized Moses for marrying an Ethiopian woman and because they were jealous of Moses as the supreme revealer of God's will. As punishment, the Lord afflicted Miriam with leprosy, turning her as white as snow, and shut her out of the camp for seven days of disgrace and shame. The Lord did heal Miriam, but only after Moses pleaded with him to do so. But how strange that, for some unexplained reason, the Lord let Aaron off scot-free. The Lord looks like a short-fused male chauvinist.

In Numbers 22:20-22 we learn that God's anger broke out against Balaam, a Mesopotamian diviner, because Balaam went to Balak, the king of Moab, even though God had given Balaam permission to go (see Nutty Nugget Number 8).

Again (25:1-9) the anger of the Lord flared up against Israel because they had worshiped the god Baal-Peor. So furious was the Lord that he slew 24,000 in a plague. That's not exactly punishment proportionate to the crime. Ditto when the Lord's anger was roused against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years because they had not wholly followed the Lord (32:10-13).

Nutty Nugget Number 5: The Sabbath Stick Sin (15:32-36)

A man was caught picking up sticks for firewood on the Sabbath, thereby violating the Lord's command to do no work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). Therefore the Lord ordered the people to stone the sorry sinner to death. Stoning, of course, is a cruel and unusual punishment, which leaves the victim a broken, bruised, and mangled mass of blood, flesh, and bones. Can anyone love a God who commands such horrors?

Nutty Nugget Number 6: Bury 'Em Alive and Burn 'Em Alive (16:1-50)

Because Korah, Dathan, and Abiram had revolted against Moses, the Lord split the earth open to swallow the rebels plus their families, servants, animals, and all their possessions. Needless to say, that was a fate much too harsh. To top that off, the Lord suddenly sent a fire that burned up 250 men who had offered incense to him. What a ghastly death for doing what Moses had commanded them to do. The Lord then outdid himself by sending a plague which killed 14,700 Israelites because they murmured against Moses and Aaron and protested the slaughter of the Lord's people. What a primitive view of God for an inspired book: a God who thinks nothing of burying people alive and burning people alive.

Nutty Nugget Number 7: Holy Cow (19:1-22)

When a man had touched a corpse he had to bring a perfect red heifer to be slain. The priest then dipped his finger into the blood and sprinkled it seven times in the direction of the sacred tent. After that, the whole cow was burned and the priest threw a stick of cedar wood, a hyssop branch, and a piece of red yarn into the fire. Then the people could mix the ashes with water to be used in a ceremony to wash away sin. Somehow or other the sacred number seven, the sacred blood of the hapless red heifer, and the sacred tent combined to make the ceremony effective.

What are we to make of such strange stuff? A liberal Christian tells us: Numbers 19 "sets forth a ritual so strange, so suggestive of a world of pure magic, that it has so far defied all attempts to account for its presence in the Hebrew legislation or to relate it satisfactorily to the religion of Jehovah." Lindsay B. Longacre, Numbers, *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1929, p. 307). Yet believers cannot ignore this magic, for the Lord himself plainly said that „this law must always be obeyed by the people of Israel" (19:10). And Jesus declared that „whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments of the Law and teaches others to do the same shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

Nutty Nugget Number 8: An Amazing Ass (22:21-35)

Here we have the nuttiest of all the nutty nuggets. Think of it! A dumb ass spoke to Balaam with a human voice and made Balaam stop his foolishness (2 Peter 2:16). According to Balaam himself, the ass made Balaam look stupid (Numbers 22:29-30). In other words, the ass made an ass out of Balaam! "The donkey speaks^{3/4} and her owner does not even seem surprised. Is there no end of bizarre events in Numbers?" (GWL p. 32).

Liberal Jews and Christians don't take the speaking ass any more literally than they do the talking serpent of Genesis 3. But as we have just seen, the „inspired" writer of 2 Peter 2:16 did believe that a dumb ass actually spoke to Balaam. If Christians repudiate 2 Peter 2:16, then they soon find themselves on the slippery slope to skepticism, rejecting one New Testament passage after another until they finally hit bottom, where they join a multitude of skeptics who find the Bible to be a mere relic of ancient superstition rather than a signal proof of God's miraculous power.

Not only does Numbers 22:21-35 tell us of a talking ass but it also tells us of a talking angel, a phenomenon which is as amazing as a talking ass. Even more than that, the angel and Balaam carry on a conversation (22:31-35). If we today overheard someone conversing with an angel, we'd call him or her crazy.

At the best, Balaam was an odd fellow. He was an internationally renowned curser who

travelled about making a living by cursing people's enemies for money. He operated a professional cursing service. Balaam and the biblical writers believed in the objective power of blessings and curses: The very words had the dynamic power to bring fortune or misfortune. Uttered by a supposedly spiritually gifted person like Balaam, a curse could do real harm and a blessing real good, or so they thought. We could call Balaam a hired gun! Rationalists, however, can no more accept the power of blessings and curses than they can accept the reality of talking asses and talking angels.

Nutty Nugget Number 9: The Ultimate Infamy (31:14-18)

During their (un)holy war with the Midianites, the Israelites killed all of the males and all of the females who had ever had sex. But the Israelites spared the young women who had never had sex and kept them for themselves. They 'butchered the boys, massacred the mothers, and debauched the daughters (Thomas Paine). It is all absolutely monstrous (GWT p. 39). Beyond this, infamy has never gone" (Robert G. Ingersoll).

A Not So Nutty Conclusion

Conceivably we could list ninety-nine nutty nuggets in Numbers. But these nine are sufficient to prove that the book of Numbers is not worthy to be included in the Bible of any religion. Numbers is indeed a relic of ancient superstition.

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