

D'var Torah: Numbers 1-4:20  
B'Midbar

Two weeks ago, at the end of May, I returned from my 65<sup>th</sup> Oberlin College reunion. The very next day, Jacqueline inadvertently dislocated her hip. Since then, we have been in Mission Hospital Asheville a lot more than we would have liked. In order to get the head of the femur back into the hip socket, she had to be operated on for the 7<sup>th</sup> time in the same place. But who's counting? Which is my segue into the portion of Numbers I'm going to talk about this evening.

The Torah portion for this week (actually last week) contains the first four chapters of the book known as Numbers in English, B'midbar in Hebrew. B'Midbar means 'in the wilderness,' and begins with God addressing Moses in the second year after the Exodus from Egypt. God wants Moses to count all the men between the ages of 20 and 60. You would think that an omniscient and all-powerful god would know how many men He had brought out of Egypt, but God wants Moses to count the men of military age who will form the army that will conquer Canaan. That doesn't make much sense since all these people, whom God brought out of Egypt, are supposed to be dead before the Hebrews ever get close to Canaan. That's the point of their wandering for 40 years in the wilderness. God could have led them directly there in two weeks, but God wants to kill off the entire generation of those Hebrews who did not trust the Lord to get them out of Egypt and to preserve them on their journey to Canaan. That's why we modern Americans print on our money and license plates that 'In God We Trust' in order to distinguish ourselves from those faithless Hebrews condemned to die in the desert.

Every ten years in the United States today, we take the census to count the population of individual states in order to apportion representation in the Congress, that is, to determine how many seats each state gets in the U.S.

House of Representatives. The founding fathers wisely decided to base that apportionment on population rather than on land ownership, education, or class. The United States conducted the first U.S. census in 1790 for the same reason that God wanted Moses to count the men in the wilderness—that is, to determine what military force could be mustered against the British. Over time, the American census developed into an instrument used to distribute federal funds to states and localities for various programs and services, such as transportation, education, public health, and infrastructure.

The census also occurs, famously, in the Christian narratives, but only in the gospel of Luke. These four authorized gospels, you know, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were all written anonymously and given the names we know them by late in the second century by Irenaeus who thought they were written, or ought to have been written, by these four apostles who knew Jesus. Actually, they were long dead at the time the anonymous gospels were written. Mark, the first of the gospel writers, provides no nativity of Jesus at all. Matthew has Jesus born in Bethlehem where his parents lived (they did not live in Nazareth), in the time of Herod who died in 4 BCE. Herod is a famous tyrant (he killed his wife and three of his sons) so Matthew ascribed the Slaughter of the Innocents, which never happened, to Herod and explained Jesus' survival by adding Mary and Joseph's escape into Egypt.

Luke is the only gospel writer who invented a full nativity scene. He includes a census that requires residents to return to the town of their ancestors, in this case from Nazareth to Bethlehem, traditionally the birthplace of the Messiah. Luke attributes the census to Caesar Augustus, who did indeed order a census in year 6 of the Common Era, but it did not apply to the whole empire, just to the newly conquered land of Syria-Palestina. Augustus wanted to know how many people were there so he could tax them. Quirinius was the governor of Syria-Palestina at that time. That census did not apply to Nazareth in Galilee,

ruled by someone entirely not Quirinius. So Joseph and Mary, living in the Galilee, would not have been required to return to Bethlehem to be counted. In any case, the Romans never required people to return to their town of familial origin. So: No trip to Bethlehem, no star in the sky, no birth in a stable, no adoration of the three Magi, no shepherds, no slaughter of the innocents, and no escape into Egypt. All that's made up in the text attributed mostly to Luke. The slaughter of the innocents and the escape into Egypt are made up by Matthew.

The census that God wants Moses to take is also made up. We're fairly confident that Moses never existed, the Hebrews were never in Egypt, there were no ten plagues, no exodus from Egypt, no crossing of the Red Sea, no wandering for 40 years in the wilderness, and no walls of Jericho tumbling down. The very fact of this census at the beginning of Numbers is itself yet more evidence that it never happened. The count is 603,550 men between the ages of 20 and 60. Plus another 22,250 Levites whose job it was to tend to the Tabernacle of the Lord, set it up at night, take it down in the morning, and transport it during the wanderings. Now, the male children younger than 20 and the men older than 60 would have brought that number to almost a million. When you add the women, girls, and grandmothers, the number rises to around two million. The population of Egypt at that time was about four million. If half the population of Egypt suddenly walked off the job and disappeared into the wilderness, you would think someone might have noticed. But no one did. Not one Egyptian, not one member of any country doing business with the Egyptians, thought it fit to mention that half the Egyptian population had disappeared.

However, we all know that there is no virtue in applying science or history or archaeology, or even reason in response to myths of national origin. That's what this is. The myth of a census seems to exist in order to validate the

subsequent Hebrew adventures in conquering Canaan. Here, the Israelites can claim, is written evidence, a census instigated by God himself, that the Hebrews who escaped from Egypt were a mighty people and sufficiently numerous to accomplish the conquest of Canaan that God promised them.