

# Numbers 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 19 April 2020

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[ 0 : 00 ] Numbers chapter 15 And for the drink offering you shall offer a third of a hint of wine, a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

And when you offer a bull as a burnt offering or sacrifice, to fulfil a vow, or for peace offerings to the Lord, then one shall offer with the bull a grain offering of three-tenths of an ephah of fine flour, mixed with half a hint of oil.

And you shall offer for the drink offering half a hint of wine, as a food offering, a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Thus it shall be done for each bull or ram, or for each lamb or young goat.

As many as you offer, so shall you do with each one, as many as there are. Every native Israelite shall do these things in this way, in offering a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

And if a stranger is sojourning with you, or anyone is living permanently among you, and he wishes to offer a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the Lord, he shall do as you do. For the assembly there shall be one statute for you, and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute for ever throughout your generations.

[ 1 : 50 ] You and the sojourner shall be alike before the Lord. One law and one rule shall be for you, and for the stranger who sojourns with you. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land to which I bring you, and when you eat of the bread of the land, you shall present a contribution to the Lord.

Of the first of your dough you shall present a loaf as a contribution, like a contribution from the threshing floor, so shall you present it. Some of the first of your dough you shall give to the Lord as a contribution throughout your generations.

But if you sin unintentionally, and do not observe all these commandments that the Lord has spoken to Moses, all that the Lord has commanded you by Moses, from the day that the Lord gave commandment, and onward throughout your generations, then if it was done unintentionally without the knowledge of the congregation, all the congregation shall offer one bull from the herd for a burnt offering, a pleasing aroma to the Lord, with its grain offering and its drink offering according to the rule, and one male goat for a sin offering.

And the priests shall make atonement for all the congregation of the people of Israel, and they shall be forgiven, because it was a mistake. And they have brought their offering, a food offering to the Lord, and their sin offering before the Lord for their mistake.

And all the congregation of the people of Israel shall be forgiven, and the stranger who sojourns among them, because the whole population was involved in the mistake. If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering, and the priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the person who makes a mistake when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.

[ 3 : 33 ] You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel, and for the stranger who sojourns among them. But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from among his people.

Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off, his iniquity shall be on him. While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day.

And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation. They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him. And the Lord said to Moses, The man shall be put to death.

All the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp. And all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him to death with stones, as the Lord commanded Moses. The Lord said to Moses, Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.

[ 4 : 44 ] And it shall be a tassel for you to look at, and remember all the commandments of the Lord to do them. Not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after.

So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God.

Numbers chapter 15, coming immediately after Numbers 13 to 14, with the spy's bad report and the condemnation of the people to forty years of wandering, would be expected to lie deep in the dark shadow of its predecessors.

However, it betrays few indications of what went before it. Rather, it's largely a set of laws about sacrifices and other seemingly miscellaneous things. One of the things that these laws do is to firmly reassert the mission and the intent of the Exodus.

It begins with a statement that refers to when you come into the land you are to inhabit. By not directly mentioning what has gone before, it suggests that the mission is not going to be finally blown off course.

[ 5 : 51 ] It will carry out its intended object. Once more, it foregrounds sacrifice and the relationship of the people with the Lord. It recalls the fact of the deliverance from Egypt and the fact that the Lord's purpose is to settle them in the promised land, something mentioned in verses 2 and 18.

The laws concerning sacrifice here also anticipate that settlement in the land when they will have the plentiful quantities of wine, oil and flour that are enjoyed in a settled agricultural society.

It also reaffirms the fact that they have access and approach to God through sacrifice, even after all their rebellion. This section of Numbers outlines the cereal and drink offerings that accompany a food offering.

A food offering is one of those sacrifices that is consumed in part by the Lord on his altar as a pleasing aroma. So it would be an ascension or whole burnt offering or a peace offering.

These were to be accompanied by the stipulated cereal and drink offerings, those stipulated offerings increasing with the size of the sacrificed animal. The drink offering would await the entry into the promised land unless they were offering some drink made from the grapes of Eshkol.

[ 7 : 00 ] Wine is a drink of celebration and rest and enjoying it had to wait for their settlement in the land. Also the drink offering was presumably entirely poured out on the altar and not participated in by the worshippers or the priests.

The priests were forbidden to drink in the tabernacle and as sacrificial food it would have to be eaten within the tabernacle precincts. The cereal offerings are described in more detail in Leviticus chapter 2.

The cereal and the drink offerings seem to, among other things, be offerings of people's work to the Lord. They also seem to function as memorials that bring the offerer and their work to mind on the basis of the sacrificed animal that they accompanied, a sacrifice that represented the person of the worshipper.

One interesting use of a cereal offering is found in the law of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5, where barley flour instead of the typical semolina wheat was used and was not adorned with oil or frankincense nor accompanied by a sacrificial animal.

There it seems to function to bring the works of the possible adulterous woman to the Lord for judgment. The apostle Paul also speaks of himself being poured out as a drink offering in Philippians chapter 2.17 and 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 6.

[ 8 : 15 ] As the wine was poured out with the blood at the base of the altar, there was presumably some sort of symbolic connection or association between the two, an association that would be worth exploring perhaps to understand the relationship between Christ's blood and wine in the new covenant.

When they entered the land, they had to present the first of their dough as a contribution, an offering of the firstfruits of their own creative labour. The apostle Paul again refers to this in Romans chapter 11 verse 16.

If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. It might be worth considering the fact that all of the offerings just mentioned elaborate the existing sacrifices with extra offerings that would occur when they entered the land.

This might help us better to understand the positioning of this material immediately after the failure to enter into Canaan. It underlines the promise and suggests a greater communion with God that will follow as they enter into the land and they can offer the fruits of the land with their existing sacrifices to the Lord.

The next section concerns offerings for unintentional sins. If the whole congregation sins unintentionally, there needs to be a purification offering of a male goat, an ascension offering of a bull.

[ 9 : 33 ] However, if an individual sins unintentionally, he must only offer a female goat. Presumably he is included in the congregational sacrifice of the bull. There is, however, no sacrifice for high-handed, presumptuous, premeditated sin.

And it seems that sin could be downgraded by repentance, but if someone intends purposefully and defiantly to go against the word of God, that is not something that there is a sacrifice for in that particular state.

The account of the Sabbath breaker that follows then seems to be an example of such high-handed sin. Numbers intersperses law and narrative and the narrative and the law need to be read alongside each other because they are mutually interpretative lots of the time.

The man gathering the sticks is to be presumed to be a high-handed Sabbath breaker. This is reminiscent of the story of the punishment for blasphemy in Leviticus chapter 24, verses 10 to 16. Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp. And the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the name and cursed.

[ 10 : 45 ] Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shalometh, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. And they put him in custody till the will of the Lord should be clear to them. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who hurt him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him, and speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall be put to death.

Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him, the sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the name, shall be put to death.

The action of the man then seems to be treated as tantamount to blasphemy. Why is his sin so serious? Exodus chapter 35 verses 1 to 3 would seem to be part of the reason why.

Moses assembled all the congregation of the people of Israel and said to them, These are the things that the Lord has commanded you to do. Six days' work shall be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord.

Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath is the central sign of the covenant and a desecration of it is to be taken with the utmost seriousness.

[ 12 : 03 ] The man seems to be engaged in a premeditated act to break the law concerning building up a fire on the Sabbath day. This is an intentional and a defiant sin. The people are uncertain of how to judge, presumably on account of the fact that he hasn't yet built the fire.

However, the premeditation is enough to condemn him. It's clear enough what he was intending to do. This is followed by another strange law concerning tassels on the corners of garments.

What on earth is that doing here? Once again, however, this is an incredibly important law in the context. It points back to the previous chapters and it anticipates the drama of the chapters that follow in the rebellion of Korah as we'll see as we go through the narrative.

Jonathan Sachs observes that there are a number of key words used here which are also key words in the story of the spies. Not to follow after your own heart could be translated not to spy out after your own heart.

The form of the verb translated for you to look at in verse 39 is also found in chapter 13 verse 18 in the instructions to the spies and see what the land is.

[ 13 : 17 ] Finally, the reference to the people's inclination to whoring recalls the reference to their whoredoms in chapter 14 verses 32 to 33. The stipulated blue thread in the tassels recalls the blue of key elements of the priestly garments.

in Exodus chapter 28 verses 28 to 29 and 36 to 38. And they shall bind the breastplate by its rings to the rings of the ephod with a lace of blue so that it may lie on the skillfully woven band of the ephod so that the breastpiece shall not come loose from the ephod.

So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord. And then in verses 36 to 38 you shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it like the engraving of a signet holy to the Lord and you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue.

It shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead that they may be accepted before the Lord.

This also recalls the handling of the most holy furniture from inside the tabernacle in Numbers chapter 4 verses 5 to 12. When the camp is to set out Aaron and his son shall go in and take down the veil of the screen and cover the ark of the testimony with it.

[ 14 : 47 ] Then they shall put on it a covering of goat skin and spread on top of that a cloth all of blue and shall put in its poles. And over the table of the bread of the presence they shall spread a cloth of blue and put on it the plates the dishes for incense the bowls and the flagons for the drink offering the regular showbread also shall be on it.

Then they shall spread over them a cloth of scarlet and cover the same with a covering of goat skin and shall put in its poles. And they shall take a cloth of blue and cover the lampstand for the light with its lamps its tongues its trays and all the vessels for oil with which it is supplied.

And they shall put it with all its utensils in a covering of goat skin and put it on the carrying frame.

And over the golden altar they shall spread a cloth of blue and cover it with a covering of goat skin and shall put in its poles.

And they shall take all the vessels of the service that are used in the sanctuary and put them in a cloth of blue and cover them with a covering of goat skin and put them on the carrying frame. So as we see here the most holy things are associated with cloths and threads of blue.

Rather than spying out after their own hearts and eyes then as we saw in the story of the spies in the previous chapters the tassels were there to alert them to their holiness as a people as their garments had something in them that connected them with the garments of the high priest and the most holy furniture of the tabernacle.

[ 16 : 15 ] A question to consider what are some of the cues that we can use to recall ourselves to our true identity as the people of God and to faithfulness to the Lord as the tassels called Israel to such faithfulness?