

Numbers 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 22 April 2020

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[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 18 Numbers chapter 18 Numbers chapter 18

Numbers chapter 18 All the best of the oil and all the best of the wine and of the grain, the firstfruits of what they give to the Lord, I give to you.

The first ripe fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the Lord, shall be yours. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it. Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.

Everything that opens the womb of all flesh, whether man or beast, which they offer to the Lord, shall be yours. Nevertheless, the firstborn of man you shall redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem.

And their redemption price, at a month old you shall redeem them, you shall fix at five shekels in silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty garrows.

[2 : 42] But the firstborn of a cow, or the firstborn of a sheep, or the firstborn of a goat, you shall not redeem. They are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar, and shall burn their fat as a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

But their flesh shall be yours, as the breast that is waved, and as the right thigh are yours. All the holy contributions that the people of Israel present to the Lord, I give to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual Jew.

It is a covenant of salt for ever before the Lord for you, and for your offspring with you. And the Lord said to Aaron, You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them.

I am your portion, and your inheritance among the people of Israel. To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die.

But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance.

[3 : 55] For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the Lord, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance. Therefore I have said to them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Moreover you shall speak and say to the Levites, When you take from the people of Israel the tithe that I have given you from them for your inheritance, then you shall present a contribution from it to the Lord, a tithe of the tithe.

And your contribution shall be counted to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor, and as the fullness of the winepress. So you shall also present a contribution to the Lord from all your tithes, which you receive from the people of Israel.

And from it you shall give the Lord's contribution to Aaron the priest. Out of all the gifts to you, you shall present every contribution due to the Lord, from each its best part is to be dedicated.

Therefore you shall say to them, When you have offered from it the best of it, then the rest shall be counted to the Levites as produce of the threshing floor, and as produce of the winepress. And you may eat it in any place, you and your households, for it is your reward in return for your service in the tent of meeting.

[5 : 09] And you shall bear no sin by reason of it, when you have contributed the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy things of the people of Israel, lest you die. To understand the placing of Numbers 18, we should remind ourselves of the end of chapter 17, in verses 12 to 13.

And the people of Israel said to Moses, Behold, we perish. We are undone. We are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die. Are we all to perish? Once again, appreciating the interplay between law and narrative in Numbers illuminates a passage like this. It helps us to understand why it is where it is.

The law here grows out of the narrative, and the narrative also helps us to understand the law's rationale and purpose. The whole chapter also settles issues raised in the rebellion of Korah, as the Lord explicitly states the various duties and prerogatives of the priests and Levites.

At the start of this passage, God directly addresses Aaron, which is very unusual. God almost invariably addresses either Moses alone, or occasionally Moses and Aaron together.

[6 : 18] Leviticus chapter 10 verse 8, after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, is the only other case outside of this chapter where the Lord addresses Aaron by himself alone.

The Lord is giving Aaron a sense of his more particular office and privileges here, which I think explains why he is addressed in such a manner. The provision of Aaron and his sons and the Levites ensured that the tabernacle could be in the midst of the camp, without the people being destroyed.

Aaron and his sons would serve on behalf of the people in the tent of meeting, while the Levites would guard Aaron and his sons and the tabernacle. By guarding the tabernacle, the Levites would ensure that no unauthorised person entered it, and brought wrath upon Israel.

If they transgressed by coming near to the vessels of the sanctuary, or to the altar, both they and Aaron would be judged. So there are restrictions upon the more general Israelites, but also restrictions upon the Levites.

And this is elaborated further. Aaron and his sons keep guard over the sanctuary, and over the altar, and serve in those matters, while the Levites are given by God to Aaron to guard, and to do the more general service of the tent of meeting.

[7 : 31] Now we should observe that the two key verbs here, describing the tasks of Aaron, his sons, and the Levites, guard and serve, are the same verbs that we find in Genesis 2, verse 15.

The Lord God took the man, and put him in the garden of Eden, to work it, and keep it. Recognising that connection, we can see that Eden was a sanctuary, and also, that the tabernacle is a new Eden.

If the sanctuary is violated, the judgment will fall upon Aaron and the Levites. As Gordon Wenham remarks, they act as spiritual lightning conductors.

They address the concern of the Israelites that's expressed at the end of chapter 17 in this way. They are a hedge of protection, given by the Lord to the Israelites. And this also helps us better to understand that the priests aren't being exalted for their own personal sakes, as Korah had suggested.

Rather, it's for the sake of all the people. All the people are benefiting from having the Levites and the priests in this position. Aaron and the priests do not have the regular inheritance in the land that the other tribes enjoy.

[8 : 41] Rather, the Lord is their inheritance. They are the palace servants of the divine king. They receive as their portion food from the Lord's table. They receive Jews from the holy things, from the parts of the grain offerings, the purification offerings, and the trespass offerings that are not offered on the altar itself.

These can be eaten by clean males of Aaron's house in a most holy place. The wave offerings and the contributions from the peace offerings, all devoted things, such as things dedicated to God in vows, the firstfruits and the flesh of firstborn clean animals, and the redemption money for unclean animals and firstborn children, would be Aaron's and his families.

And this would be a covenant of salt. Why salt? Because salt endures and preserves, so it's an everlasting covenant between the Lord and Aaron's household.

The Levites, as their inheritance, receive all of the tithes of Israel for their service of the Tent of Meeting and for serving to protect the rest of Israel from the threat of divine judgment.

The final section of this chapter is addressed not to Aaron, but to Moses, which is fitting because it's concerning what the Levites had to give to Aaron. And had that been given to Aaron as an instruction, it would seem that he was putting himself over the Levites, rather than God instructing this.

[10 : 07] The Levites themselves have to present a tenth of the tenth that they receive, the first and the best part, to the priests. After they have done that, the rest is theirs to consume as they

wish.

The Levites' portion is a very large one. However, it depended upon the people's faithfulness in paying it, which was a very real problem as we see in places like Malachi 3, verses 8 to 10. Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, How have we robbed you? In your tithes and contributions you are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.

The chapter ends with a warning that the Levites don't profane the holy things of Israel lest they die. And this, I think, draws our attention once more back to the story of the rebellion of Korah.

[11 : 15] The judgment that fell upon Korah and the rebels was precisely for their failure to observe this commandment. This chapter then serves to formalize and gather in one place the prerogatives of the priests and the Levites.

It addresses the presenting issue of the rebellion of Korah. And by doing all of this after the people's recognition of their great danger and their need for protection from the glorious presence of God in their midst, it gives the rationale for the priesthood and the Levites.

In so doing, the interplay of law and narrative in chapters 16 to 18 gives us a sense of the necessity, the importance, and the nature of the Levitical and priestly offices and roles.

A question to consider. In 1 Corinthians 9 verses 11-14, the Apostle Paul writes, If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

[12 : 30] Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

How, considering this passage and others in the New Testament, might the Old Testament teaching concerning the Levites and the priests inform us and our practice in the New Covenant? What significance, for instance, can be seen in the dependence of ministers upon the gifts of the people of God?