

Numbers 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 7. On the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle, and had anointed and consecrated it with all its furnishings, and had anointed and consecrated the altar with all its utensils, the chiefs of Israel, heads of their fathers' houses, who were the chiefs of the tribes, who were over those who were listed, approached, and brought their offerings before the Lord, six wagons and twelve oxen, a wagon for every two of the chiefs, and for each one an ox. They brought them before the tabernacle. Then the Lord said to Moses, Accept these from them, that they may be used in the service of the tent of meeting, and give them to the Levites, to each man according to his service. So Moses took the wagons and the oxen, and gave them to the Levites. Two wagons and four oxen he gave to the sons of Gershon, according to their service, and four wagons and eight oxen he gave to the sons of Merari, according to their service, under the direction of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest. But to the sons of Kohath he gave none, because they were charged with the service of holy things that had to be carried on the shoulder. And the chiefs offered offerings for the dedication of the altar on the day it was anointed. And the chiefs offered their offering before the altar. And the Lord said to Moses, They shall offer their offerings, one chief each day, for the dedication of the altar.

He who offered his offering the first day was Nashon the son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah. And his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels, full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Nashon the son of Amminadab.

On the second day, Nethanel the son of Zuah, the chief of Issachar, made an offering. He offered for his offering one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels, full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Nethanel the son of Zuah. On the third day, Eliab the son of Helan, the chief of the people of Zebulun. His offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels, full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Eliab the son of Helan.

On the fourth day, Eliza the son of Shedia, the chief of the people of Reuben, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels, full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old.

[3 : 30] This was the offering of Eliza the son of Shedia. On the fifth day, Shalumiel the son of Zerushaddai, the chief of the people of Simeon, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt

offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Shalumiel the son of Zerushaddai. On the sixth day, Eliasaph the son of Duel, the chief of the people of Gad, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Eliasaph the son of Duel. On the seventh day, Elishamah the son of Amihad, the chief of the people of Ephraim, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Elishamah the son of Amihad.

On the eighth day, Gmaliel the son of Pedazur, the chief of the people of Manasseh, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Gamaliel the son of Pedazur. On the ninth day, Abide and the son of Gideoni, the chief of the people of Benjamin, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Abide and the son of Gideoni.

On the tenth day, Ahazah, the son of Amishadai, the chief of the people of Dan, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Ahazah, the son of Amishadai. On the eleventh day, Pagiël, the son of Akran, the chief of the people of Asher, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old.

This was the offering of Pagiël, the son of Akran. On the twelfth day, Ahirah, the son of Enan, the chief of the people of Naphtali, his offering was one silver plate, whose weight was one hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, one golden dish of ten shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Ahirah, the son of Enan.

This was the dedication offering for the altar, on the day when it was anointed, from the chiefs of Israel, twelve silver plates, twelve silver basins, twelve golden dishes, each silver plate weighing one hundred and thirty shekels, and each basin seventy, all the silver of the vessels, two thousand four hundred shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, the twelve golden dishes full of incense, weighing ten shekels apiece, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, all the gold of the dishes, being one hundred and twenty shekels, all the cattle for the burnt offering, twelve bulls, twelve rams, twelve male lambs a year old, with their grain offering, and twelve male goats for a sin offering, and all the cattle for the sacrifice of peace offerings, twenty-four bulls, the rams sixty, the

male goats sixty, the male lambs a year old sixty. This was the dedication offering for the altar after it was anointed, and when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim, and it spoke to him.

[9 : 04] The events of Exodus, Leviticus, and the opening chapters of Numbers overlap in time. However, the books have different yet complementary emphases, and so record events contemporaneous with, yet unrecorded among, the events found within the others. The result is a fuller sense of what was taking place in the establishment of the covenant, the tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrificial system, and the nation at Sinai, as each book presents different facets of what occurred. The events of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers are not in chronological order, neither in the sequence of the three books, nor within the books themselves.

While the ordering within the books is broadly chronological, like several other biblical books, events are occasionally presented out of historical sequence, generally for thematic or literary purposes. In the case of Numbers chapter 7, its dating is given to us at the beginning. It's dated to the conclusion of the establishment of the tabernacle structure and the dedication of the altar. It's contemporaneous with the final events recorded in the book of Exodus in chapter 40, and with the ordination of the priests recorded in Leviticus chapters 8 to 10. However, whereas Exodus chapter 40 focused upon Moses and the establishment of the tabernacle structure, and Leviticus focused upon the ordaining of the priests for their service at the beginning of the sacrificial system, Numbers focuses upon the actions of the wider body of Israel relative to these things. This focus is in keeping with the broader accent of the book of Numbers upon the way that the wider nation is implicated in the tabernacle, the priesthood, and its order. While only the sons of Aaron are appointed as priests, and the clans of the Levites are distinct in their service of the tabernacle, the rest of Israel is also placed within the firmament of the new order, their vast constellations arrayed around the tabernacle in their respective camps.

In the preceding chapters we observe the ways in which principles that were initially applied directly to relations to God, to the tabernacle, and to the priesthood, are extended out into the more general relations and life of the nation. In this chapter the connection between the tabernacle and its service at the heart of the camp, and the tribes that surround it, is being further highlighted.

The chiefs of Israel's tribes, the heads of the fathers' houses, donate six wagons, one for every two of them, and an ox each. The correlation between the givers and the gifts perhaps suggests that we ought to see the wagons and oxen as representing those who donated them. The oxen and their wagons represent the tribal chiefs' share in the bearing of the tabernacle. In chapter 4, when the instructions were given to the three clans of the Levites concerning the bearing of the tabernacle, the clan of Kohath was to bear their items upon their shoulders on poles, while the way that the clans of Gershon and Morarae would bear their items was left unclear. The weight of their items would have been considerably greater than that of the furniture of the tabernacle committed to the charge of Kohath, so they presumably needed some sort of assistance in their task of transportation. In chapter 7 we discover the means by which they would bear their items. Two wagons and their oxen were given to Gershon, charged with bearing the hangings, screens and curtains of the tabernacle, and four wagons and their oxen were given to Morarae, charged with transporting the frames, pillars and bases of the tabernacle. Morarae's items were clearly the heaviest of all, so they needed the greatest number of animals to assist them. The holy status of the items committed to Kohath's charge can be seen in the distinctive ways in which they were handled and transported. They had to be packed up by the priests, covered over with their own tabernacle-like coverings, and carried upon the shoulders of the Kohathites. In 2 Samuel chapter 6, Israel under David made the error of carrying the Ark of the Covenant upon an ox cart, and Uzzah died when he touched the Ark to steady it when the oxen stumbled. Perhaps we are also to understand in that passage that the Ark was not properly covered either.

[12 : 53] With Psalm 119 and Deuteronomy chapter 28, Numbers chapter 7 is one of the three longest chapters in the whole Bible. However, its great length is almost entirely due to its seemingly redundant repetition. The information within it could seemingly have been communicated in a fraction of the space that it takes. What reason could there be for such extensive repetition in the listing of all of the gifts brought by the chiefs or princes of the various tribes? Every single one of the chiefs brings an identical gift. A silver plate of 130 shekels, a silver basin of 70 shekels, both full of

fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, a golden dish of 10 shekels full of incense, one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering, one male goat for a sin offering, and two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old for peace offerings.

Each individual gift is recorded, and then the total of the identical gifts is recorded. As Gordon Wenham notes, the purpose of the repetitiveness is likely to underline the fact that each tribe of Israel is fully and equally committed to the worship of the tabernacle, and has the same stake within it. The rhetorical effect of the repetition is to drive the importance of the tribes investment in the worship of the tabernacle home to the hearer, and to leave us with no doubt that the establishment of the tabernacle occurred exactly as it was supposed to occur. The gifts of the tribal chiefs occurred over a period of 12 days. The tribal chiefs were the same men who assisted Moses and Aaron in the numbering of the people in chapters 1 and 2. They would also be the men who would lead the tribes as the people set out in chapter 10. We should keep in mind that the organization of the camp and the people that is occurring at this stage is largely in preparation for the rapidly approaching time when they will move on from Sinai. The tribes, in the order of the days that they give their gifts, is as follows. Judah Issachah Zebulun, Reuben Simeon Gad, Ephraim Manasseh Benjamin, Dan Asher Napdali. The ordering of the tribes in their offerings moves clockwise around the face of the camp, as described in chapter 2, east, south, west, and then north. This follows the same order as the order of the Levites clan's duties in chapter 4. Given the numerological and structural ways in which the camp of Israel might be related to calendrical and astronomical realities, perhaps there is significance to be found in the ordering of the tribes here. The fact that they give their gifts in sequence on 12 successive days, rather than all at once, might add weight to such speculations. Their gifts involve every one of the principal forms of offering, save for the reparation offering, which would not be required. Tribute offering, offerings of incense, burnt offerings from the herd and the flock, the purification offerings required of rulers, a male goat, oxen, rams, male goats, and male lambs as peace offerings. Peace offerings were more voluntary than the other sacrifices, and not public sacrifices to the same degree. The law of the peace offering also allowed for male and female animals. However, all of the animals given for the peace offering by the chiefs were males, and the ages of several of them is made clear, suggesting that it was not without significance. The peace offerings would have allowed for the celebration of greater inaugural feasts at the time of the foundation of the tabernacle. The chapter ends with Moses going into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord. While only the high priest was able to enter the most holy place, and only once a year, on the day of atonement, Moses was over the high priest, and seems to have had a special level of access to the Lord's presence. Once again we should recall the way that the tabernacle corresponds with Mount Sinai. At Mount Sinai, Moses alone ascended to the top of the the mountain to meet with the Lord. The Lord's presence is especially focused on the ark of the covenant, and more particularly with the mercy seat that is above it. The ark of the covenant is like a throne, the chest part of it is like the footstool, as we see in places like 1st Chronicles chapter 28 verse 2. Then King David rose to his feet and said, Hear me my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord and for the footstool of our God, and I made preparations for building. The footstool, as in various thrones of the ancient Near East, would have been richly decorated and an important item in its own right. The worshippers of the Lord come to his footstool on account of his exalted status. We see this in Psalm 99 verse 5 for instance, Exalt the Lord our God, worship at his footstool, holy as he. Above the footstool is the mercy seat with the cherubim. The Lord is understood to be enthroned above the cherubim, a claim that is often encountered in various parts of the scriptures, and as the last verse of this chapter suggests, the Lord speaks from above the mercy seat and between the cherubim. The ark of the covenant itself could be seen as a sort of cosmic symbol, as suggested in Isaiah chapter 66 verse 1. Thus says the Lord, Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? The footstool represents the earth, and the Lord is enthroned above it in the heavens. The ark is thus itself a model in miniature of the wider cosmos of Mount Sinai and of the greater tabernacle that surrounds it. A question to consider, how might Moses going into the tabernacle to speak with the Lord enrich our understanding of the tabernacle and the temple more generally?