

Numbers 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 10. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Make two silver trumpets, of hammered work you shall make them, and you shall use them for summoning the congregation and for breaking camp. And when both are blown, all the congregation shall gather themselves to you at the entrance of the tent of meeting. But if they blow only one, then the chiefs, the heads of the tribes of Israel, shall gather themselves to you.

When you blow an alarm, the camps that are on the east side shall set out, and when you blow an alarm the second time, the camps that are on the south side shall set out, and alarm is to be blown whenever they are to set out. But when the assembly is to be gathered together, you shall blow a long blast, but you shall not sound an alarm. And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets.

The trumpet shall be to you for a perpetual statute throughout your generations. And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the Lord your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies.

On the day of your gladness also, and at your appointed feasts, and at the beginning of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings. They shall be a reminder of you before your God. I am the Lord your God.

In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony. And the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sarniai, and the clouds settled down in the wilderness of Paran. They set out for the first time at the command of the Lord by Moses. The standard of the camp the people of Judah set out first by their companies, and over their company was Nashon the son of Amminadab, and over the company of the tribe of the people of Issachar was Nethanel the son of Zuah, and over the company of the tribe of the people of Zebulun was Eliab the son of Helon. And when the tabernacle was taken down, the sons of Gershon and the sons of Merari, who carried the tabernacle, set out. And the standard of the camp of Reuben set out by their companies, and over their company was Eliza, the son of Shediah.

[1 : 59] And over the company of the tribe of the people of Simeon was Shalumiel, the son of Zerushaddai, and over the company of the tribe of the people of Gad was Eliasaph, the son of Duol. Then the Kohathites set out, carrying the holy things, and the tabernacle was set up before their arrival. And the standard of the camp of the people of Ephraim set out by their companies, and over their company was Elishemer, the son of Ammihad. And over the company of the tribe of the people of Manasseh was Gamaliel, the son of Pedazur. And over the company of the tribe of the people of Benjamin was Abidun, the son of Gideon. Then the standard of the camp of the people of Dan, acting as the rear guard of all the camps, set out by their companies. And over their company was Ahaiizah, the son of Amishaddai. And over the company of the tribe of the people of Asher was Pagiël, the son of Akran, and over the company of the tribe of the people of Naphtali was Ahirah, the son of Enan. This was the order of march of the people of Israel by their companies when they set out. And Moses said to Hobab, the son of Ruol, the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, We are setting out for the place of which the Lord said,

I will give it to you. Come with us, and we will do good to you, for the Lord has promised good to Israel. But he said to him, I will not go, I will depart to my own land and to my kindred. And he said, Please do not leave us, for you know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will serve as eyes for us. And if you do go with us, whatever good the Lord will do to us, the same will we do to you. So they set out from the mount of the Lord three days' journey, and the ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them. And the

cloud of the Lord was over them by day, whenever they set out from the camp, and whenever the ark set out, Moses said, Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you. And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel. James Jordan observes the similarities between the silver trumpets with which Numbers chapter 10 begins, and the Lord's glory cloud with which Numbers chapter 9 ends. The silver trumpets seem to serve a similar purpose to that of the cloud.

In Exodus chapter 19, verses 12 to 13, Moses instructed the children of Israel concerning the arrival of the Lord in his glory cloud at Sinai. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, Take care not to go up into the mountain, or to touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot.

Whether beast or man, he shall not live. When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain. In Exodus chapter 19, a long blast of the divine trumpet summons the people together to the mountain. In Numbers chapter 10, a comparable long blast of the silver trumpets summons the people to the entrance of the tent meeting. As we've noted on various other occasions, the tabernacle is analogous to Sinai, with the entrance to the tabernacle and its courtyard being akin to the base of the mountain, around which the camp of Israel gathered. We read more about the divine trumpet in Exodus chapter 19, verses 16 to 20. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

[5 : 44] Throughout the book of Numbers, we see the earthly mirroring the heavenly. The camp of Israel in its vast and ordered array surrounding the tabernacle, within which the Lord is enthroned above the cherubim, is an image of the heavenly camp surrounding the Lord's glorious heavenly throne. Now the divine trumpet that accompanies the glory cloud is mirrored in glorious silver trumpets, which serve a similar function to the cloud. In the immediately preceding verses, it is the glory cloud that directs their journeys, and here it is the silver trumpets made as part of its earthly representation that do the same thing. The tabernacle itself and the ark within it are also earthly representations of the glory cloud.

There are different words used for trumpets and horns of various kinds in the Pentateuch. Most commonly, the trumpet is the shofar or the yobel, made of ram's horn. Both of these two words are used in relation to the trumpet of the Lord in Exodus chapter 19. As Jacob Milgram observes, the shofar is employed on several different sorts of occasions in scripture, being used to muster armies, declare victory, frighten enemies, sound an alarm, end a battle, announce a coronation, or initiate a rebellion.

In the Septuagint of Psalm 98 verse 6, the distinction is made between trumpets of metal, the same word as that used for the silver trumpets in this chapter, and trumpets of horn, the shofar. However, the term shofar appears to be used in a more general manner to refer to both types of instruments in scripture.

The distinction between the two, as Milgram argues, is mostly to be found in the different persons who sounded them. The silver trumpets were priestly instruments. A distinction between the instruments used by the people more generally and the instruments used by the priests can also be discerned, perhaps, by the attentive reader in the account of the blowing of the trumpets at the Battle of Jericho.

In scripture, trumpets are associated with the feast of trumpets, and also with the start of the year of jubilee. The arch of Titus, upon which items taken from Jerusalem's temple in AD 70 are depicted, might give us a sense of the appearance of the silver trumpets, having a long and thin tube with a flared end, not too dissimilar to a horn like the vuvuzela that one might see at a South African sporting event.

[7 : 57] In verse 11, at the time of the conclusion of the alternative Passover for those who are unclean for the Passover of the first month, the cloud finally lifted from over the tabernacle, and the people had to follow it out. The manner in which the camp moved out is described in verses 13 to

28, all occurring according to the command of the Lord and under the direction of Moses. Judah, led by Nashon, the son of Amminadab, one of the ancestors of King David, led the way, with the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun, also situated on the east side of the tabernacle, accompanying him. Then the clans of Gershon and Merari, to the north and west of the tabernacle at the centre of the camp, responsible for dismantling and transporting the structure of the tabernacle, followed. Next, Reuben, Simeon and Gad, on the southern side of the tabernacle. The Kohathites, on the southern side of the tabernacle, followed after them. Despite being the most prominent clan of the Levites, they followed later because the tabernacle was to be assembled by the Merarites and the Gershonites prior to their arrival with its furniture.

Afterwards, Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin, the western tribes, followed. The tribes of Dan, Asher and Naphtali, on the northern side of the camp, were the rearguard. The place of the priests within the procession of the camp is not mentioned. Although as they were the ones who blew the trumpets, and as presumably some of them were also bearers of the ark, perhaps we are to assume that many of them were situated at the very front. As they leave Mount Sarniai, Moses asks Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, or possibly his father-in-law, to accompany them on their journey. We are not told whether or not he accompanied them here. However, in Judges chapter 4 verse 11, we learn that Hobab did indeed join Israel. Jael was married to a Kenite, and likely a Kenite herself, the Kenites being descended from that line of the Midianites. In 1 Samuel chapter 15 verse 6, King Saul warned the Kenites to separate themselves from the Amalekites, so that they could be spared on account of the kindness that they showed to the Israelites as they first left Egypt, in stark contrast to the Amalekites among whom they dwelt. While not Israelites, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, and the other Midianites of his house, had been a great aid to Moses and the people. They had given Moses a home when he first fled Egypt, and then given counsel and guidance to him at Sinai, as we see in chapter 18 of Exodus. Hobab knew the wilderness of that region well, and if he would accompany Israel on its ongoing journey, he could be an invaluable guide.

Moses seemingly persuaded him to throw in his lot with Israel. He would be blessed with the rest of the people. We read in Judges chapter 1 verse 16, And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of Palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negev near Arad, and they went and settled with the people. It seems that the Ark of the Covenant was set apart from the other holy items of the tabernacle, leading the people on their journey with the cloud to which it corresponded, while the other holy items borne by the Kohathites were further back in the procession. The Ark was, we should recall, distinguished from those other items and being covered with the cloth of blue, while all of the other holy items had external coverings of goat skin. The priests were also sons of Kohath, yet distinguished from the rest of that clan. When we read of the Ark being carried, it seems to be the priests, not merely regular Levites that seem to be doing it.

It is a Kohathite task, yet performed only by the chief among the sons of Kohath, the priests. The Ark was especially connected with the Lord's presence. The Lord was seen to be enthroned above the cherubim, and the pillar of cloud and fire seems to have been especially connected with the Ark, the Ark being the earthly shadow, as it were, of the glory cloud above it. At the end of chapter 9, the cloud led the people on their journeys, and at the end of chapter 10, the Ark seems to play a similar role, along with the silver trumpets with which the chapter begins. As in the case of the trumpets, the heavenly is being mirrored within and mapped onto the earthly. This mirroring and mapping can also be seen in the declarations of Moses at the rising and the resting of the Ark with which this chapter concludes. We might see an allusion to Moses' declaration at the rising of the Ark in Psalm 68 verses 1 to 4. God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered, and those who hate him shall flee before him. As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away. As wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God. But the righteous shall be glad, they shall exult before God, they shall be jubilant with joy. Sing to God, sing praises to his name, lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts. His name is the Lord, exult before him. The Lord is the one who rides through the deserts in his throne chariot, borne aloft on the shoulders of his priests and people.

A question to consider. Where in scripture might we find examples of processions of the people of Israel, upon which this passage can shed some light.