

Numbers 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 30. Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, saying, This is what the Lord has commanded. If a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. If a woman vows a vow to the Lord, and binds herself by a pledge, while within her father's house and her youth, and her father hears of her vow, and of her pledge by which she has bound herself, and says nothing to her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if her father opposes her on the day that he hears of it, no vow of hers, no pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. And the Lord will forgive her, because her father opposed her. If she marries a husband, while under her vows, or any thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she has bound herself, and her husband hears of it, and says nothing to her on the day that he hears, then her vow shall stand, and the pledges by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if on that day that her husband comes to hear of it, he opposes her, then he makes void her vow that was on her, and the thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she bound herself, and the Lord will forgive her. But any vow of a widow, or of a divorced woman, anything by which she has bound herself, shall stand against her. And if she has vowed in her husband's house, or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, and her husband heard of it, and said nothing to her, and did not oppose her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she bound herself shall stand. But if her husband makes them null and void on the day that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows, or concerning her pledge of herself, shall not stand. Her husband has made them void, and the Lord will forgive her. Any vow and any binding oath to afflict herself, her husband may establish, or her husband may make void. But if her husband says nothing to her from day to day, then he establishes all her vows, or all her pledges that are upon her. He has established them, because he said nothing to her on the day that he heard of them. But if he makes them null and void after he has heard of them, then he shall bear her iniquity.

These are the statutes that the Lord commanded Moses about a man and his wife, and about a father and his daughter while she is in her youth within her father's house. Many readers of the book of Numbers over the years have regarded it as a sort of dusty shed of the Pentateuch. Within it we find a miscellaneous assortment of laws and narratives that really do not fit in elsewhere, nor constitute a coherent whole among themselves. One moment we're reading about the ordering of Israel's camp, the next we're reading a ritual for a jealous husband. Many have felt just such a jarring sense of the disorder and incoherence of the book, in reading chapter 30. Chapters 28 and 29 concerned the sacrifices of Israel's festal calendar. But in chapter 30, as if with a screeching of tires, we veer into the area of women's vows. What significance might laws concerning vows, and especially women's vows, have at this juncture in the book of Numbers? We're gearing up for entrance into the promised land. Surely such arcane laws belong elsewhere. There are far more important issues to deal with at this time. Why this chapter and its contents are found at this particular point in the book is a question that must be at the forefront of our minds as we reflect upon this chapter.

As we're moving through a book like this, it's important that we don't miss the forest for the trees. If we were to narrowly focus upon the particularities of this text, we could easily be oblivious to its strangeness in its current context. A good interpretation of this passage, in addition to explaining its internal details, will give some account of its purpose and its context.

Hopefully by the conclusion of our reflections here, we will have a clearer sense of what might be going on. While we will return to the question later on, at the outset we might take an initial stab at addressing it. The list of required sacrifices of the public cult of the tabernacle, in Numbers chapters

28 and 29, are followed in this chapter by laws concerning vows freely taken by individuals. This is like the contrast that we see between the beginning of the book of Leviticus and its conclusion. Leviticus began with central sacrifices in the tabernacle in its first chapter, and concluded with laws concerning vows in its final chapter, in chapter 27. Together these connect the extremities of Israel's religious life. Its public, mandatory, and centralized sacrificial worship, on the one hand, and its private, voluntary, and decentralized free acts of devotion, on the other.

Perhaps something similar is going on in Numbers chapter 30. The focus upon women's vows might also be considered in light of this. The public cult of the tabernacle was an overwhelmingly male place.

[4 : 39] The priests were exclusively male, and it was the males of the people in particular who were expected to appear before the Lord on the great bestial occasions. However, Numbers chapter 30 is principally about women's vows. We have moved from the extreme of the most public and most male dimensions of Israel's religious life to the most private and female dimensions. As in Leviticus chapters 1 and 27, these two extreme poles might bookend the entire broader practice of Israel's worship that falls between them. Vows were an exceedingly solemn matter. While voluntary, a vow was something to which someone would be strictly held. Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 21 to 23 declares, If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth. Ecclesiastes gives a great warning to those who might rashly vow in chapter 5 verses 4 to 6. When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? At several points in the Psalms, the psalmist speaks of making vows to the Lord in a day of trouble, and then subsequently paying his vows to the Lord upon his deliverance from his distress. In Genesis chapter 28 verses 20 to 22,

Jacob made a vow that we might perhaps see as the basis of the tithe that his descendants would pay to the Lord. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that you give me, I will give a full tenth to you. In Numbers chapter 6, we read of the Nazarite vow. The Nazarite vow was a temporary vow of special devotion to the Lord. The prophet Samuel and John the Baptist seem to have been under lifelong Nazarite vows. Jephthah's vow in Judges chapter 11 is an example of a rash vow, a vow for which he lost his daughter. Another famous vow is that of Hannah in 1 Samuel chapter 1, she swore to devote to the Lord the son that he gave in response to her prayer. Hannah's vow would be an example of a woman's vow, which, according to the teaching of this chapter, could have been affirmed or annulled. The man would bear responsibility for the vows of the women of his household, his daughters and his wife, which were not performed. The husband could annul his wife's vow, but if he failed to do so when he heard of the vow, or remained silent concerning it, he would also be held responsible for its performance. Gordon Wenham observes a parallel scheme that orders this passage. There are two groups of three paralleled cases. The unbreakable vows of men, mentioned in verse 2, are paralleled with the unbreakable vows of widows and divorcees, in verse 9. In verses 3 to 5, girls' vows that are avoidable by their fathers are paralleled with the wives' vows that are avoidable by their husbands. In verses 6 to 8, girls' vows that are avoidable by their fiancé are paralleled with the wives' vows that are avoidable with a penalty, in verses 13 to 15. Wenham writes further, the second and third laws in each group both fall into two parts, considering first the case when the woman's husband or father says nothing, thereby confirming her vow, and second the situation where he annuls it by objecting to it. As he observes, this is not a comprehensive treatment of vows. There is nothing said here about sons or about older unmarried women. This might suggest that there is something more symbolic going on here as well.

This returns us to our initial question. What is this passage doing here? Why deal with women's vows in this context in the book of Numbers? We should bear in mind that there was an earlier vow, made in chapter 21, verses 2 and 3. And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord and said, if you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction. And the Lord heeded the

voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction. So the name of the place was called Horma. However, the chapters that had followed had concerned the failure of Israel. Balak had sent Balaam to curse them. That had failed, so Balaam had sought to compromise Israel instead, causing them to bring a curse upon themselves by their sexual and spiritual adultery with Baal of Peor and the Midianite women in chapter 25. Speaking of the women of Midian, Moses declared in verse 16 of the following chapter, Behold, these on Balaam's advice caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. Chapter 26, the second census. Chapter 27, the assurance of the inheritance to the daughters of Zelophehad, and the appointment of Joshua as Moses' successor, and chapters 28 to 29, which order Israel's time in a comparable way to the ordering of its space in chapters 2 to 4 of the book, are a reconstitution of the nation after its great breach of faith with the Lord in its idolatry and spiritual adultery. Like the test of jealousy in chapter 5 of the book, the laws concerning women's vows in chapter 30 can function on two levels. On the surface level of the text, which should not be neglected, they refer to the manner in which women's vows would be upheld or nullified in Israel's ongoing life. However, on the symbolic level, this passage gestures towards Israel's vows in its relationship to the Lord as his bride. Israel would be expected to perform the vow that it had made back in Numbers chapter 21. This is exactly what Israel needed to do in the following chapter, as they set right what went wrong in their act of treachery back in chapter 25. Rabbi David Foreman argues that there is another subtle allusion back to this chapter in Esther chapter 4, where Mordecai speaks to Esther concerning the king's edict to kill the Jews. In Numbers chapter 30, the man has the apparent third option of making himself deaf to his wife's vow, of acting as if he's not aware of it. However, this functions as a tacit affirmation. The husband actually accepts his wife's vow by not objecting to it. In verses 13 and 14 of chapter 4, Mordecai addresses Esther as follows. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews, for if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place. But you and your father's house will perish, and who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Mordecai applies something of the logic of Numbers chapter 30 to

[11 : 33] Esther's situation. If she does not object to her husband's vow, to his edict, she is implicated within it, and she shares in his sin. Behind Mordecai's argument is a sort of play with the text of chapter 30 of Numbers. The word *isha* is the Hebrew word for woman. However, with a dot in the hay, the same word means her husband. Mordecai is inviting Esther to read Numbers 30 as if that dot was not present in the hay. Instead of her husband, read a woman. Esther's preparedness to speak up in relationship to her husband's vow or edict is what changes the situation for the Jews. At the suggestion of Mordecai, she creatively applies Numbers chapter 30 to herself, and through it saves her people.

Within the New Testament, we have several examples of vows that the people of God take. The apostle Paul, for instance, takes a vow in the book of Acts. In 1 Corinthians chapter 7 verses 4 and 5, however, we see something more of the reciprocity that should characterize vows in the relationship of husband and wife. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.

Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer, but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

The ideal, then, is not unilateral vows of husband or wife, but the harmony of the husband and wife's will in shared vows. A question to consider, what place might vows have within Christian practice?