

Numbers 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 31. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterwards you shall be gathered to your people. So Moses spoke to the people saying, Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the Lord's vengeance on Midian. You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war.

So there were provided out of the thousands of Israel a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war. And Moses sent them to the war, a thousand from each tribe, together with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand. They warred against Midian as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every male. They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of their slain, Evi, Rechem, Zer, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. And they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword.

And the people of Israel took captive the women of Midian and their little ones. And they took as plunder all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods, all their cities in the places where they lived, and all their encampments they burned with fire, and took all the spoil and all the plunder, both of man and of beast. Then they brought the captives and the plunder and the spoil to Moses, and to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the people of Israel, at the camp on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. Moses and Eleazar the priest and all the chiefs of the congregation went to meet them outside the camp. And Moses was angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands, and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war. Moses said to them, Have you let all the women live? 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 upon the congregation of the Lord. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves. Encamp outside the camp seven days. Whoever of you has killed any person, and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves and your captives on the third day, and on the seventh day.

You shall purify every garment, every article of skin, all work of goat's hair, and every article of wood. Then Eleazar the priest said to the men in the army who had gone to battle, This is the statute of the law that the Lord has commanded Moses. Only the gold, the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead, everything that can stand the fire, you shall pass through the fire, and it shall be clean. Nevertheless, it shall also be purified with the water for impurity. Whatever cannot stand the fire, you shall pass through the water. You must wash your clothes on the seventh day, and you shall be clean, and afterward you may come into the camp. The Lord said to Moses, Take the count of the plunder that was taken, both of man and of beast, you and Eleazar the priest, and the heads of the fathers' houses of the congregation, and divide the plunder into two parts between the warriors who went out to battle and all the congregation, and levy for the Lord a tribute from the men of war who went out to battle, one out of five hundred, of the people, and of the oxen, and of the donkeys, and of the flocks. Take it from their hearth, and give it to Eleazar the priest as a contribution to the Lord. And from the people of Israel's half you shall take one drawn out of every fifty, of the people, of the oxen, of the donkeys, and of the flocks, of all the cattle, and give them to the

Levites who keep guard over the tabernacle of the Lord. And Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the Lord commanded Moses. Now the plunder remaining of the spoil that the army took was 675,000 sheep, 72,000 cattle, 61,000 donkeys, and 32,000 persons in all, women who had not known man by lying with him.

[3 : 36] And the half, the portion of those who had gone out in the army, numbered 337,500 sheep, and the Lord's tribute of sheep was 675, the cattle were 36,000, of which the Lord's tribute was

72,000, the donkeys were 30,500, of which the Lord's tribute was 61,000, the persons were 16,000, of which the Lord's tribute was 32 persons. And Moses gave the tribute, which was the contribution for the Lord, to Eleazar the priest, as the Lord commanded Moses. From the people of Israel's half, which Moses separated from that of the men who had served in the army, now the congregation's half was 337,500 sheep, 36,000 cattle, and 30,500 donkeys, and 16,000 persons. From the people of Israel's half, Moses took one out of every 50, both of persons and of beasts, and gave them to the Levites who kept guard over the tabernacle of the Lord, as the Lord commanded Moses. Then the officers who were over the thousands of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, came near to Moses, and said to Moses, Your servants have counted the men of war who are under our command, and there is not a man missing from us. And we have brought the Lord's offering, what each man found, articles of gold, armlets and bracelets, signet rings, earrings and beads, to make atonement for ourselves before the Lord. And Moses and Eleazar the priest received from them the gold, all crafted articles, and all the gold of the contribution that they presented to the Lord, from the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, was 16,750 shekels. The men in the army had each taken plunder for himself, and Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from the commanders of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the tent of meeting, as a memorial for the people of

Israel before the Lord. In Numbers chapters 22 to 24, the Moabites, seeing the initial successes of Israel in their wars in the Transjordan, had joined with the Midianites in seeking to drive them back. Balak, the king of Moab, had sent messengers to the prophet Balaam, the son of Beor, hoping that he would curse Israel for them, undermining their rides in the region. However, this had not gone according to the plan. Balaam had initially rejected Balak's request. Later, Balaam's answer changed, and he went along with them. But the Lord frustrated Balaam, obstructing his way with the angel of the Lord, and even opening the mouth of his donkey, who had seen the angel while Balaam had not.

Balaam's failure to cooperate with the wishes of Balak, like Balaam's donkey's failure to cooperate with him, was most climactically expressed in the Lord's opening of the mouth of the false prophet Balaam to utter a series of blessings upon his people, rather than the curse that Balak had requested. After the utter failure of that attempt to curse Israel, Balaam, the Moabites, and the Midianites needed an alternative plan. If they were unable to curse Israel, perhaps they could cause Israel to bring a curse upon itself. In Numbers chapter 25, the people of Israel had engaged in idolatrous relations with Baal of Peor, and had sexual relations with Moabite and Midianite women. Chapter 25, verses 1-3 While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to haul with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. At Sinai, after Israel sinned with the golden calf, the Lord had warned them about precisely this danger.

[7 : 07] Exodus chapter 34, verses 12-16 Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their ashram, for you shall worship no other god. For the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous god. Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land. And when they whore after their gods, and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons. And their daughters whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods. Relations with pagan women would go hand in hand with worship of foreign gods, and this is precisely what occurred in Numbers chapter 25.

At that time the Levite Phinehas had acted decisively to put a halt to Israel's breach of faith, but not before 24,000 people had died. The catastrophic effects of the plague that broke out at that time is evident from the greatly reduced numbers of the tribe of Simeon in the second census in chapter 26. The numbers of Simeon's fighting men plummeted from 59,300 to 22,200.

After the second census, Israel had been placed on a new footing, in preparation for the entrance into the land. Chapter 30, which precedes this chapter, seems to be a disruption of the flow of the book, concerning the voiding and validating of the vows of wives and daughters. However, in the context, the chapter reminded us of the vow that Israel had made back in chapter 21, verses 2-3. And Israel vowed, vowed 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 Hormah. Despite Israel's subsequent unfaithfulness, the Lord was going to validate Israel's vow, and they would carry it out in this chapter, in their war of vengeance against the Midianites. In chapter 31, we discover that Balaam had been behind the compromise of Israel with the daughters of Moab and Baal of Peor in chapter 25. We read in verse 16, 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.

[9 : 28] After the events of chapter 25, the Lord had commanded the people in verses 16-18. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Harass the Midianites, and strike them down, for they have harassed you with their wives, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cosbi, the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on account of Peor. As Daniel Olson notes, the name Cosbi has formed the consonants of the Hebrew verb for lying or deceiving. Moses and the Israelites, having been restored in their footing after the breach of faith in chapter 25, in the intervening chapters, now needed to carry out the Lord's charge. In verse 2, we learn that this would be the last great task of Moses' life in leading the people. After it was completed, it would be Moses' time to die. The Midianites are spoken of as descendants of Abraham by Keturah, in Genesis chapter 25 verse 2, although it is likely that the designation referred to a broader body of people, more of a shifting league of tribes than a particular land or tribal group. They were, as Gordon Wenham notes, a large confederation, operating in several different areas, with various associations. In Genesis chapter 37 and Judges chapter 8, the Midianites were associated with the Ishmaelites. In Numbers chapter 22, the Midianites were associated with Moabites. In Judges chapter 6, they were associated with the Amalekites.

The Transjordanian Midianites that Moses and the Israelites attack in this chapter are different from other Midianite groups, which would have been found in the Negev, Sinai Peninsula, Edom, the Transjordan, and the northwestern Arabian Peninsula. Jacob Milgram observes that the Midianites seem to have enjoyed a protectorate within the wider region of the Transjordan. From Genesis chapter 36 verse 35, it seems that the Midianites also exercised power within Edom for some time. We should recall that Moses had sojourned with the Midianites after fleeing from Egypt. He had married a Midianite called Zipporah, and Hobab, Moses' Midianite brother-in-law, accompanied them on their travels. The war of this chapter then, would not have been against the entirety of the Midianite confederacy, which appears again in the Book of Judges, but particularly against the Midianites associated with Moab. The Midianites were not within the Promised Land proper, which might make us wonder at the uncompromising character of the war against them in this chapter. However Midian, in seeking to corrupt Israel, had seduced the Lord's bride. They had attacked the covenant itself. The religious nature of the war is quite evident. Little is said about the military leadership. No mention is made of Joshua, for instance, but Phineas, the son of the high priest, and the one who had faithfully executed the Lord's zeal in chapter 25, accompanies the military, along with the silver trumpets that were appointed in chapter 10. These silver trumpets, as we saw, were an earthly analogue to the trumpet sounds of the Lord's glory cloud. Phineas also brings the vessels of the sanctuary. The Book of Numbers largely concerns the ordering and the choreography of the war camp of Israel, and now we finally see the camp in motion, like the Lord's own throne chariot and its retinue going out to do battle. The prominence of Phineas also invites the reader to consider the ways in which this war is one in which the whole nation is being called to follow the example that Phineas set. That each tribe is required to send 1,000 men to the war suggests that the war against Midian is not merely a military operation for immediate strategic ends. It's a judicial act, in the execution of which each tribe in Israel must be fully and equally represented. The war against the Midianites in the Transjordan would prepare Israel for the battles that it would need to fight within the Promised Land itself. The record of the battle itself is slight, is recounted in verses 7 and 8. Much of the account concerns the taking of the plunder and the return to the rest of the congregation of Israel. The war of this chapter is also mentioned in Judges chapter 13 verses 21 and 22, which describes the Transjordanian regions that would be allocated to the tribe of Reuben.

Sihon king of the Amorites who reigned in Heshbon, who Moses defeated with the leaders of Midian, Evi and Rechem, and Zer and Hur and Reba, the princes of Sihon who lived in the land. Balaam also, the son of Beor, the one who practiced divination, was killed with the sword by the people of Israel among the rest of their slain. While the women of such a city would usually have

been spared, as we see in Deuteronomy chapter 20, on this occasion they were to be judged along with the men.

[14:00] They had been direct participants in Balaam's attempt to subvert the people of Israel. Only the virgins among the women of Midian were to be spared. In such a war against a people outside of the promised land proper, Israel was allowed to take plunder. However, they had to undergo the process of cleansing from corpse defilement that we read of in chapter 19 of Numbers. They would only be able to re-enter the camp on the seventh day. The plunder from the war is divided into two halves, one half for the warriors who went out to the battle and the other half for the entire congregation. Then a levy for the Lord is taken from each amount. The people who went out to war have to give one five hundredth of their spoil, a thousandth of the total amount that went to Eliezer as a contribution to the Lord. Out of Israel's portion, the other half, a fiftieth of their portion, or one hundredth of the total amount, a tithe of a tithe, had to go to the Levites who guarded the tabernacle. We see such a tithe of a tithe in Numbers chapter 18 verse 26. We are given a list of the plunder that was taken. As with figures that we find elsewhere in the book of Numbers, the numbers here are astronomically large. Adding together the number of sheep, cattle, donkeys, and persons, we get a total of 840,000. This would seem to be a significant number. It's 70 times 12 times a thousand. The numbers 70 and 12 are significant elsewhere in the book of Numbers, not least in chapter 33 verse 9, where we are informed that at Elim there were 70 palm trees and 12 springs.

There were of course 12 tribes of Israel and 70 elders as we see in chapter 11. By many numberings there were 70 nations of the world and there were 70 bulls offered over the Feast of Tabernacles.

The officers of the army report to Moses the remarkable news that none of their men have been lost. In Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16, Moses was instructed to take money from each of the people as a ransom for their lives. The Lord said to Moses, When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this, half a shekel according to the shekel of the Sanctuary. The shekel is 20 geras, half a shekel as an offering to the Lord.

Everyone who is numbered in the census from 20 years old and upward shall give the Lord's offering. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel when you give the Lord's offering to make atonement for your lives. You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord so as to make atonement for your lives.

Despite similarities between these two episodes, there are also important differences. Michael Fishbane writes, First of all, we may observe that the gift of a census expiation was made by the chief officers alone, not those in the ranks, and that the donation was brought into the tent as a reminder.

[17:02] Three immediate differences thus emerged by comparison with Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16. First, in that text, Moses took the census, not military men. Second, the expiation offering prescribed was obligated upon all Israelite males as a special gift and not just as devolving upon those who conducted the count. And third, the sacrificial offering was specifically used for the building of the tent of meeting, and was not a general gift. One could go further. In Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16, the offerings were to be of silver at a fixed price, calculated to holy weights, whereas in the Midian affair the officers gave gold according to their desire. Indeed, in this case, the mighty could exceed in generosity while the regulars could abstain. As a final point, it is most striking that the officers' donation in Numbers chapter 31 was taken from the spoils of a condemned population. Even retaining such goods at home was an abomination to the Deuteronomist. In our case, they even brought it to the tent before the Lord.

A question to consider, what similarities are there between the events of this chapter and those of the events of Judges chapter 21?