

Numbers 32: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 32. Now the people of Reuben and the people of Gad had a very great number of livestock, and they saw the land of Jazar and the land of Gilead, and behold the place was a place for livestock. So the people of Gad and the people of Reuben came and said to Moses and to Eliezer the priest, and to the chiefs of the congregation, Ataroth, Dibon, Jazar, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elielah, Sebum, Nebo, and Beon, the land that the Lord struck down before the congregation of Israel, is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock. And they said, If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession. Do not take us across the Jordan. But Moses said to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben, Shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here? Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land that the Lord has given them? Your fathers did this when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to see the land. For when they went up to the valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the people of Israel from going into the land that the Lord had given them.

The Lord's anger was kindled on that day, and he swore, saying, Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt from twenty years old and upward shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not wholly followed me, none except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite, and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the Lord.

And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was gone. And behold, you have risen in your father's place, a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the Lord against Israel. For if you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all this people. Then they came near to him and said, We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock, and cities for our little ones, but we will take up arms, ready to go before the people of Israel, until we have brought them to their place, and our little ones shall live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until each of the people of Israel has gained his inheritance, for we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on this side of the Jordan to the east. So Moses said to them, If you will do this, if you will take up arms to go before the Lord for the war, and every armed man of you will pass over the Jordan before the Lord, until he has driven out his enemies from before him, and the land is subdued before the Lord. Then after that you shall return and be free of obligation to the Lord and to Israel, and this land shall be your possession before the Lord. But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the Lord, and be sure your sin will find you out. Build cities for your little ones, and foals for your sheep, and do what you have promised. And the people of Gad and the people of Reuben said to Moses, Your servants will do as my Lord commands. Our little ones, our wives, our livestock, and all our cattle shall remain there in the cities of Gilead. But your servants will pass over every man who is armed for war before the Lord to battle, as my Lord orders. So Moses gave command concerning them to Eleazar the priest, and to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the people of Israel. And Moses said to them, If the people of Gad and the people of Reuben, every man who is armed to battle before the Lord, will pass with you over the Jordan, and the land shall be subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilead for a possession. However, if they will not pass over with you armed, they shall have possessions among you in the land of Canaan.

And the people of Gad and the people of Reuben answered, What the Lord has said to your servants we will do, we will pass over armed before the Lord into the land of Canaan, and the

possession of our inheritance shall remain with us beyond the Jordan. And Moses gave to them, to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben, and to the half-tribe of Manasseh the son of Joseph, the kingdom of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and the kingdom of Og, king of Bashan, the land and its cities with their territories, the cities of the land throughout the country. And the people of Gad built Dibon, Ataroth, Eroah, Atrosh-Shopan, Jezer, Jogbeha, Beth-Nimra, and Beth-Hadran, fortified cities and foals for sheep. And the people of Reuben built Heshbon, Eliela, Kiriathim, Nebo, and Baal-Meon, their names were changed, and Sidma, and they gave other names to the cities that they built.

[4 : 16] And the sons of Mekir, the son of Manasseh, went to Gilead and captured it, and dispossessed the Amorites who were in it. And Moses gave Gilead to Mekir, the son of Manasseh, and he settled in it. And Jezer, the son of Manasseh, went and captured their villagers, and called them Havoth-Jeer.

And Noba went and captured Kenath and its villagers, and called it Noba after his own name. In Numbers chapter 32, an event occurs that makes us at first wonder whether Israel is going to fall at the final hurdle. Just as they are about to enter into the land, it seems like Reuben and Gad are drawing back. When Reuben and Gad tell Moses and Eliezer that they plan to stay back in the land of the Transjordan, Moses is clearly angry, and also distressed. It seems like the events of chapters 13 and 14 are playing out all over again. The people had once been discouraged from entering into the promised land by the bad report of the spies. And now, as Gad and Reuben draw back at the last moment, they might be discouraged once more. Following Israel's victories against the Amorites and the Midianites in the land of the Transjordan, they enjoyed possessions outside of the promised land proper. And the land of these possessions looked very promising to Reuben and Gad, who needed extensive grazing land for their flocks. Moses is furious, and although the people would not have forgotten, he recounts the entire history of what had happened 38 years ago. Because of the bad reports of the spies and the people's refusal to enter into the promised land, the Lord was angry with his people, and all except Caleb and Joshua of that generation had died out as a result. Moses, however, is misreading the intentions of Gad and Reuben. Gad and Reuben relieve Moses' fears and set his mind at rest by communicating their true intent. They come near to him to communicate to him. Rabbi David Foreman sees in the wording here an expression of Reuben and Gad's willingness to cross the gap. They are not going to stand over against Moses and argue with him. They will go to whatever extent is necessary to allay his concerns. Having settled their wives and families within their territory, they offer to go ahead of the rest of the tribes to lead them into the promised land. Far from avoiding the battle for the land, they commit themselves to being found in the thickest part of it. Moses accepts their requests, but requires of them that they cross over before the people and do not return until the land has been conquered. If they fail to do this, the Lord will hold them accountable. Moses gathers the people together and reports on the decision that has been made to the terms by which Gad and Reuben had bound themselves. Moses adds the condition that if they fail to do what they have committed themselves to do, they will forfeit their title to the Transjordanian land and be given land alongside the other tribes. There is a surprising addition in verse 33. Alongside Reuben and Gad, the half tribe of Manasseh, the son of Joseph, will inherit land to the east of the Jordan. The tribe of Manasseh then will straddle the Jordan River, one half in the promised land proper and the other half in the Transjordan. In such a manner the tribe of Manasseh would be a bridge tribe connecting the two halves of the land together. The Jordan River was a geographical seam on which the nation was always in danger of being torn apart. We see this especially in the story of Joshua chapter 22 where the distrust between the people on the different sides of the Jordan nearly led to all out war. In that chapter Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built an altar on their side of the Jordan which was intended, they argued, to be a memorial, not to be a rival altar or an alternative site of worship.

The two and a half tribes explain their reasoning in verses 24 to 29 of that chapter. No, but we did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, what have you to do with the Lord, the God of Israel? For the Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you people of Reuben and people of Gad. You have no portion in the Lord.

So your children might make our children cease to worship the Lord. Therefore we said, let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you and between our generations after us, that we do perform the service of the Lord in his presence with

our burnt offerings and sacrifices and peace offerings. So your children will not say to our children in time to come, you have no portion in the Lord. And we thought, if this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we should say, behold the copy of the altar of the Lord, which our fathers made, not for burnt offerings nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you. Far be it from us that we should rebel against the Lord and turn away this day from following the Lord by building an altar for burnt offering, grain offering or sacrifice, other than the altar of the Lord our God that stands before his tabernacle. This expression of the fears of the two and a half tribes gives a window into the tensions and anxieties that existed on that fault line. In Deuteronomy chapter 3, Moses describes the allocation of the land to these two and a half tribes in verses 12 to 20 of that chapter. When we took possession of this land at that time,

[9 : 20] I gave to the Reubenites and the Gadites the territory beginning at Uroa, which is on the edge of the valley of the Arnon, and half the hill country of Gilead with its cities, the rest of Gilead and all Bashan, the kingdom of Og, that is all the region of Argab, I gave to the half tribe of Manasseh.

All that portion of Bashan is called the land of Rephaim. Jair the Manassite took all the region of Argab, that is Bashan, as far as the border of the Geshurites and the Maacathites, and called the villages after his own name, Habath-Jair, as it is to this day. To Mekia I gave Gilead, and to the Reubenites and the Gadites I gave the territory from Gilead as far as the valley of the Arnon, with the middle of the valley as a border, as far over as the river Jabbok, the border of the Ammonites, the Araba also, with the Jordan as the border from Kinnerath as far as the Sea of the Araba, the Salt Sea, under the slopes of Pisgah on the east. And I commanded you at that time, saying, The Lord your God has given you this land to possess. All your men of valor shall cross over armed before your brothers, the people of Israel. Only your wives, your little ones, and your livestock, I know that you have much livestock, shall remain in the cities that I have given you, until the Lord gives rest to your brothers as to you, and they also occupy the land that the Lord your God gives them beyond the Jordan. Then each of you may return to his possession which I have given you. Moses himself would die in the Transjordan, and the fact that Reuben Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh took their possessions there meant that Moses, even though he would die outside the Promised Land, would not die outside the possessions of his people. He died in the land of Reuben. Gordon Wenham writes of the land of Gilead. Gilead designates a variety of areas in the Old Testament.

His primary meaning, as here, is the hilly district south of the Jabbok, but it may also refer to the area north of the Jabbok as well, and sometimes it designates the whole of the Transjordanian territory held by Israel, for instance in Joshua chapter 22 verse 9 and 13 etc. These high lands, around 2500 feet overlooking the Jordan Valley, enjoy a good rainfall and are therefore very fertile. Gilead was an important site in the history of Israel. It was to Gilead that Jacob had been pursued by Laban. At Gilead they had entered into a covenant, and Jacob, not knowing that his wife Rachel had taken his father-in-law's household gods, declared a death sentence on the person in whose possession they were found. Later, that death sentence perhaps coming back to haunt him, Ishmaelites had come from Gilead on camels, and had brought his son Joseph down into Egypt. It might be illuminating to read the end of this chapter against the background of that history. Fulman observes an unusual detail, although Jair is described as a Manassite here. In 1st Chronicles chapter 2 verses 21 and 22, he's described as a descendant of Judah. Afterward, Hezron went in to the daughter of Machir, the father of Gilead, whom he married when he was 60 years old, and she bore him Sagub, and Sagub fathered Jair, who had 23 cities in the land of Gilead. Surprisingly then, Jair is truly a descendant of Judah, although he has a Manassite grandmother. That he has considered a Manassite is surprising, considering that tribal ancestry is usually reckoned on the father's side. In Genesis chapter 37, when the camels had come down from Gilead, Judah had led the brothers against Joseph. Here, however, a man of Judah is numbered among the sons of Joseph, and leads them in their conquest of the land. Together they take Gilead, this place of painful memory, the place of the dreadful curse against the matriarch Rachel. There is something of the redemption of the history here. In Genesis chapter 37, Jacob was devastated when he discovered that his son Joseph was likely torn. In Numbers chapter 32, there is a sort of tearing of Joseph. Part of Manasseh is on one side of the Jordan, and part of Manasseh is on the other side of the Jordan. However, this tearing in two serves to hold the nation more firmly together, so it would not be torn asunder. By entrusting one half of Joseph's firstborn son Manasseh to the

firstborn tribe of Leah, Reuben, and Gad, the firstborn tribe of Leah's handmaid Zilpah, and the other half of Manasseh to the tribes that crossed over the Jordan, brothers that had once sold Joseph into slavery, would be bound together by a shared commitment to the tribe named after his firstborn son. A question to consider, how does the character of Hezron, who married the daughter of Machir, the father of Gilead, resonate with the story of some other characters who had descended from Machir that we read of in the book of Numbers?