

Numbers 29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 29. On the first day of the seventh month you shall have a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a day for you to blow the trumpets, and you shall offer a burnt offering for a pleasing aroma to the Lord, one bull from the herd, one ram, seven male lambs a year old without blemish, also their grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil, three-tenths of an ephah for the bull, two-tenths for the ram, and one-tenth for each of the seven lambs, with one male goat for a sin offering to make atonement for you.

Besides the burnt offering of the new moon and its grain offering, and the regular burnt offering and its grain offering, and their drink offering, according to the rule for them, for a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the Lord. On the tenth day of this seventh month you shall have a holy convocation and afflict yourselves. You shall do no work. But you shall offer a burnt offering to the Lord, a pleasing aroma, one bull from the herd, one ram, seven male lambs a year old. See that they are without blemish. And their grain offering shall be a fine flour mixed with oil, three-tenths of an ephah for the bull, two-tenths for the one ram, a tenth for each of the seven lambs, also one male goat for a sin offering, besides the sin offering of atonement, and the regular burnt offering and its grain offering, and their drink offerings. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month you shall have a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall keep a feast to the Lord seven days. And you shall offer a burnt offering, a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the Lord, thirteen bulls from the herd, two rams, fourteen male lambs a year old. They shall be without blemish. And their grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil, three-tenths of an ephah for each of the thirteen bulls, two-tenths for each of the two rams, and a tenth for each of the fourteen lambs. Also one male goat for a sin offering, besides the regular burnt offering, its grain offering and its drink offering. On the second day, twelve bulls from the herd, two rams, fourteen male lambs a year old without blemish, with the grain offering and the drink offerings for the bulls, for the rams and for the lambs, in the prescribed quantities. Also one male goat for a sin offering, besides the regular burnt offering, and its grain offering and their drink offerings. On the third day, eleven bulls, two rams, fourteen male lambs a year old without blemish, with the grain offering and the drink offerings for the bulls, for the rams and for the lambs, in the prescribed quantities. Also one male goat for a sin offering, besides the regular burnt offering and its grain offering and its drink offering.

On the fourth day, ten bulls, two rams, fourteen male lambs a year old without blemish, with the grain offering and the drink offerings for the bulls, for the rams and for the lambs, in the prescribed quantities. Also one male goat for a sin offering, besides the regular burnt offering, its grain offering and its drink offering. On the 5th day, 9 bulls, 2 rams, 14 male lambs a year old without blemish with the grain offering and the drink offerings for the bulls, for the rams and for the lambs in the prescribed quantities. Also one male goat for a sin offering besides the regular burnt offering and its grain offering and its drink offering. On the 6th day, 8 bulls, 2 rams, 14 male lambs a year old without blemish with the grain offering and the drink offerings for the bulls, for the rams and for the lambs, in the prescribed quantities. Also one male goat for a sin offering. Besides the regular burnt offering, its grain offering and its drink offerings.

On the seventh day, seven bulls, two rams, fourteen male lambs a year old without blemish. With the grain offering and the drink offerings for the bulls, for the rams and for the lambs, in the prescribed quantities. Also one male goat for a sin offering. Besides the regular burnt offering, its grain offering and its drink offering. On the eighth day you shall have a solemn assembly, you shall not do any ordinary work, but you shall offer a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord, one bull, one ram, seven male lambs, a year old without blemish, and the grain offering and the drink offerings for the bull, for the ram, and for the lambs, in the prescribed quantities, also one male goat for a sin offering, besides the regular burnt offering and its grain offering and its drink offering.

These you shall offer to the Lord at your appointed feasts, in addition to your vow offerings and your free will offerings, for your burnt offerings, and for your grain offerings, and for your drink offerings, and for your peace offerings. So Moses told the people of Israel everything just as the Lord had commanded Moses. Numbers chapter 29 continues the discussion of the sacrifices appropriate to particular days in Israel's calendar, which began in the preceding chapter. Chapter 28 laid out the morning and the evening sacrifices that were the backbone of Israel's worship. On top of these, the sacrifices of the Sabbath, and then in addition to those, the sacrifices of the first of each month. These patterns of worship, the days, the weeks, the months, would then be elaborated by the sacrifices particular to specific feasts of Israel's calendar.

[4 : 44] In contrast to Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, the focus in Numbers is not upon the lay celebration of these feasts, but upon the public, central, and priestly liturgies appropriate to them.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, no mention is made of many of the sacrifices that would be proper to these feasts that would have been celebrated by lay persons. The Passover lamb is not mentioned, nor are the peace offerings, first fruits offerings, or wave offerings that would be appropriate on the Feast of Pentecost. In these chapters then, we see more of a public, central liturgy that would have integrated all of Israel's life. Their worship was not just the gathered worship of lots of different households, but a central priestly worship performed in the tabernacle and later temple. In such a manner, a collective identity of Israel as a worshipping body is emerging. Israel is not just a gathering of different households as a collective. It is the unified corporate body of a nation. Daniel Olson observes, the year is divided into twelve months. The year is also divided into two major halves, just as the day is divided into two halves of day and night, and the week into six days of work and one day of Sabbath rest, so the year has a bipartite structure. Significant festivals in the first month mark the first half of the year, and another set of significant festivals occur in the seventh month to mark the second half of the year. The seventh month can also be thought of as the sabbatical month.

There is a sort of symmetry between the two halves of the year. The first month has a great feast of seven days in the Feast of Unleavened Bread from the 15th to the 21st days. The seventh month has another feast of the same kind, a seven-day feast from the 15th to the 21st day of the month, the Feast of Booths. The Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorates the cutting off of the leaven of Egypt in the Exodus. The Festival of Booths commemorates, among other things, Israel's dwelling in tents as they left the land of Egypt. The Feast of Booths or Tabernacles or Succoth was connected with their first departure from Egypt, and when they dwelt in tents for the first time with the Lord's dwelling in their midst in the pillar of cloud and fire. We should observe the fact that these commemorate the very same day. This can be seen in Exodus chapter 12 verses 30 to 39.

And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. There was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel, and go serve the Lord as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also. The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, We shall all be dead. So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders. The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewellery and for clothing. And the Lord had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians. And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot besides women and children.

A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves. The fact that the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles commemorate different aspects of the same event, further accents the symmetry in Israel's festal calendar, there is also a single day of celebration preceding the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and a single day of celebration and Holy Convocation after the Feast of Tabernacles.

[8 : 31] Israel's festal calendar, then, could be thought of as being bookended by these two celebrations of one day, both occurring on different sides of seven-day feasts. The list of sacrifices in these two chapters has the effect of unlining the climactic character of the Feast of Tabernacles.

On the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles, 70 bulls, 14 rams, and 98 lambs were offered, in addition to the regular sacrifices. This quantity of animals vastly exceeded those offered at any other time of the year, setting the Feast of Tabernacles apart as the greatest of the public celebrations of Israel's calendar. If the Feast of Passover would have foregrounded the individual households of the nation, the Feast of Tabernacles accented their existence as a corporate entity.

In the Feast of Tabernacles, Israel is seen in its full stature as a nation. Unsurprisingly, the Feast of Tabernacles was associated with some of the greatest national events, with the dedication of the temple by Solomon, and also with covenant renewal in Nehemiah chapters 8 to 10. Typical feast days involved the sacrifice of one ram as a burnt offering, and seven lambs as burnt offerings. On each day of the Feast of Tabernacles, two rams and 14 lambs were offered, twice the number. If the weekly Sabbath doubled the number of sacrifices of the regular day, the Feast of Tabernacles is like the Sabbath of the festivals. In addition to the rams and the lambs of the burnt offering, the Feast of Tabernacles involves a great quantity of bulls, counting down from 13 bulls offered on the first day to seven on the seventh. James Jordan suggests that the offering of 70 bulls over the course of the Feast might correspond with the 70 nations of Genesis chapter 10. Over the course of the year, a vast quantity of animals would be sacrificed and other things offered to the Lord. Gordon Wenham writes,

Every year in future, the priests will have to sacrifice 113 bulls, 32 rams, and 1,086 lambs, and offer more than a ton of flour and 1,000 bottles of oil and wine. The altar, the table of the Lord, would be richly furnished, and this would be an expression of the prosperity and fertility of the land more generally. A question to consider, how can we see the number seven and a sabbatical principle woven into Israel's more general sacrificial calendar?