

Numbers 34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 34. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Command the people of Israel and say to them, When you enter the land of Canaan, this is the land that shall fall to you for an inheritance, the land of Canaan as defined by its borders. Your south side shall be from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom, and your southern border shall run from the end of the Salt Sea on the east, and your border shall turn south of the ascent of Akrabim, and cross to Zin, and its limits shall be south of Kadesh Barnea.

Then it shall go on to Hazar Adar, and pass along to Asmon, and the border shall turn from Asmon to the brook of Egypt, and its limits shall be at the sea. For the western border you shall have the great sea and its coast, this shall be your western border. This shall be your northern border, from the great sea you shall draw a line to Mount Hor, from Mount Hor you shall draw a line to Libo Hamath, and the limit of the border shall be at Zidat. Then the border shall extend to Ziphron, and its limit shall be at Hazar-Enan. This shall be your northern border. You shall draw a line for your eastern border from Hazar-Enan to Shiphah, and the border shall go down from Shiphah to Riblah on the east side of Aion, and the border shall go down and reach to the shoulder of the sea of Kinnerath on the east. And the border shall go down to the Jordan, and its limit shall be at the Salt Sea. This shall be your land as defined by its borders all around. Moses commanded the people of Israel, saying, This is the land that you shall inherit by lot, which the Lord has commanded to give to the nine tribes and to the half-tribe. For the tribe of the people of Reuben by father's houses, and the tribe of the people of Gad by their father's houses, have received their inheritance, and also the half-tribe of Manasseh. The two tribes and the half-tribe have received their inheritance beyond the Jordan, east of Jericho, toward the sunrise. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, These are the names of the men who shall divide the land to you for inheritance, Eleazar the priest, and Joshua the son of Nun.

You shall take one chief from every tribe to divide the land for inheritance. These are the names of the men. Of the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jephunneh. Of the tribe of the people of Simeon, Shemuel the son of Amihud. Of the tribe of Benjamin, Elidad the son of Kishon. Of the tribe of the people of Dan a chief, Bukhi the son of Jogli. Of the people of Joseph, of the tribe of the people of Manasseh a chief, Haniel the son of Ephod. And of the tribe of the people of Ephraim a chief, Chemuel the son of Shifthan. Of the tribe of the people of Zebulun a chief, Elisaphon the son of Parnak. Of the tribe of the people of Issachar a chief, Paltiel the son of Azan. Of the tribe of the people of Asher a chief, Ahijah the son of Shilomai. Of the tribe of the people of Naphtali a chief, Pedahel the son of Amihud. These are the men whom the Lord commanded to divide the inheritance for the people of Israel in the land of Canaan.

In Numbers chapter 34, Israel is preparing for entry into the promised land. As we saw in chapter 32, not all of the tribes would be entering into the promised land proper. Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh would settle in territory outside of the land, in the Transjordan, even though they would go ahead of the rest of the people in the military conquest of the land. Ten tribes would possess land in the promised land itself, although Manasseh would have part of their portion in Gilead.

The principles for the division of the land were given in chapter 26 verses 52 to 56. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Among these the land shall be divided for inheritance according to the number of names. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance. Every tribe shall be given its inheritance in proportion to its list, but the land shall be divided by lot. According to the names of the tribes of their fathers they shall inherit. Their inheritance shall be divided according to lot between the larger and the smaller.

[3 : 42] This was before the decision of Reuben and Gad to settle outside of the land. The instruction was repeated at the end of the preceding chapter in chapter 33 verse 54. You shall inherit the land by lot according to your clans. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance. Wherever the lot falls for anyone, that shall be his. According to the tribes of your fathers you shall inherit.

The principles, as we saw then, probably involved the determination of the region of the tribe by lot, and the determination of the size of their territory in the region, according to their population.

The Lord gives the boundaries of the land here. The boundaries, as Jacob Milgram and others know, do not seem to correspond with the historic boundaries of Israel at any point in its history, and not merely on account of the exclusion of the Transjordan.

They do, however, closely approximate to the boundaries of the province of Canaan during the new kingdom of Egypt. The boundaries extend further north and further to the northeast than they did throughout almost all of the nation's history, except perhaps at the high water mark of Solomon's kingdom, and perhaps a couple of other brief periods, during which time Israel possessed substantial territory in contemporary Lebanon and Syria.

On the other hand, they possessed less land in the south than they would later do. For significant periods of their history, Edom was under Judah's sway, and Israel enjoyed southern ports on the Gulf of Aqaba at various times.

[5 : 08] The southern border of the land here is given as running from the bottom of the Dead Sea, moving southwest to Kadesh at its lowest point, and then gradually ascending to the Mediterranean. They would not possess the land of Edom, their brother.

The western border of the land would be the Great Sea, the Mediterranean. The northern border ran from the Mediterranean coast to Mount Hor, from there to Lebo-Hemath, and then extending to Zedad, generally thought to be Zedad in Syria, about 60 miles northeast of Damascus, to Ziphron, and then ending at Hazar-Inan.

The final eastern border is clearly defined by the Dead Sea in the Jordan, up until the Sea of Kinnereth, more familiarly known as the Sea of Galilee. After that, however, it bulges out to the east, incorporating land in modern-day Syria, although the precise location of its boundary is quite unclear, as key locations cannot be identified.

Dennis Olson notes the way that the boundaries of the land given in this chapter seem to correspond with the land that is spied out in chapter 13, verse 21. So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebo-Hemath.

This would be an assurance to the children of Israel that their inheritance in the land had not been diminished since chapter 13. Also, the choice of the men from each tribe to divide out the inheritance in the land in this chapter is reminiscent of the choice of the men from each tribe to spy out the land in chapter 13.

[6 : 32] Joshua and Caleb are once again involved. Joshua is now overseeing the process with Eliezer, the son of Aaron. The boundaries of the land are also similar to those described in places like Joshua chapter 15.

Ezekiel's prophetic vision of the allocation of the land in chapter 47, verses 15 to 18 of his prophecy also seem to have the same general boundaries. This shall be the boundary of the land.

On the north side, from the great sea by way of Hethlon to Lebo-Hemath, and on to Zedad, Berotha, Sibram, which lies on the border between Damascus and Hamath, as far as Hazar-Hatakon, which is on the border of Hauron.

So the boundary shall run from the sea to Hazar-Eenan, which is on the northern border of Damascus, with the border of Hamath to the north. This shall be the north side. On the east side, the boundary shall run between Hauron and Damascus, along the Jordan between Gilead and the land of Israel, to the eastern sea and as far as Tamar.

This shall be the east side. Likewise, during Solomon's reign, the land is described as extending from Lebo-Hemath to the brook of Egypt, in 1 Kings chapter 8 verse 65. On a few occasions, such as Genesis chapter 15 verse 18, the land is envisaged as having potentially even more expansive boundaries, extending from the Euphrates to the river of Egypt, presumably the Nile Delta.

[7 : 51] As Olsen observes, however, the more modest extent of the land is more typically described in the expression from Dan to Beersheba, as Israel did not successfully possess all of the land originally appointed for them.

The names of the men listed to assist in the division of the land are loosely ordered by their tribe's possessions in the land, from the south to the north. A question to consider, on what other occasions in the book of Numbers are persons chosen, one from each tribe, to represent their tribe in some common activity?