

Numbers 33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 33. These are the stages of the people of Israel when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Moses wrote down their starting places stage by stage by command of the Lord and these are their stages according to their starting places. They set out from Ramses in the first month on the fifteenth day of the first month. On the day after the Passover the people of Israel went out triumphantly in the sight of all the Egyptians while the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn whom the Lord had struck down among them. On their guards also the Lord executed judgments. So the people of Israel set out from Ramses and camped at Sarkoth and they set out from Sarkoth and camped at Etham which is on the edge of the wilderness. And they set out from Etham and turned back to Pi-hihiroth which is east of Baal-zipson and they camped before Migdal. And they set out from before Hihiroth and passed through the midst of the sea into the wilderness and they went a three days journey into the wilderness of Etham and camped at Marah. And they set out from Marah and came to Elam. At Elam there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees and they camped there. And they set out from Elam and camped by the Red Sea.

And they set out from the Red Sea and camped in the wilderness of Sin. And they set out from the

and camped at Libna.

from Moses and camped at Bene

40th year after the people of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt on the first day of the fifth month. And Aaron was 123 years old when he died on Mount Hor. And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev in the land of Canaan, heard of the coming of the people of Israel.

And they set out from Mount Hor and camped at Zalmanah. And they set out from Zalmanah and camped at Punon. And they set out from Punon and camped at Obath. And they set out from Obath and camped at Ila-Abarim in the territory of Moab. And they set out from Iaim and camped at Dibongad.

And they set out from Dibongad and camped at Alman-Diblothaim. And they set out from Alman-Diblothaim and camped in the mountains of Abarim before Nebo. And they set out from the mountains of Abarim and camped in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. They camped by the Jordan from Beth Jeshamoth as far as Abel-Shittim in the plains of Moab. And the Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their figured stones, and destroy all their metal images, and demolish all their high places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it. 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. But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.

Numbers chapter 33 presents the itinerary of Israel's journeys over the forty years of their wilderness wanderings. Israel would soon be entering into the land, and so it was a fitting occasion to look back upon the way that they had come. In recounting their travels, they also needed to consider the lessons that they had learned upon the way. Although the forty years in the wilderness was in part a punishment for the people's refusal to enter the promised land on account of their unbelief, it was also an intensive period of training that Israel had to undergo before they could graduate to life in the land. As Moses told the people in Deuteronomy chapter 8 verses 2 to 5, And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you, and let you hunger, and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothing did not wear out on you, and your foot did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you. Their travels are recounted as a series of stages. We are told where they began a particular leg of their journey, and where they camped at the end of it. Each leg begins with the location with which the preceding leg ended. Jacob Milgram and

[5 : 54] Gordon Wenham observed the similarity between the list of the stations on Israel's journey, and accounts of Assyrian military campaigns. They suggest that Numbers chapter 33 fits a broader itinerary genre. There are 42 locations mentioned in the list, beginning with Ramses, from which they first set out, and ending at the plains of Moab near the Jordan, from which they would enter the promised land. There are accounts of various stretches of Israel's journeys in the wilderness elsewhere in the Pentateuch, but this is by far the most comprehensive account. While there are some locations mentioned elsewhere that aren't mentioned here, it is in Numbers chapter 33 that we find the fullest list of locations. While there is extensive overlap, there are differences between the list of locations in Numbers chapter 33, and those mentioned elsewhere in the book, or in the book of Exodus, or in the various retrospective accounts of stages in Israel's wilderness journeys in the book of Deuteronomy. In some cases, different names are used for the same place, Deuteronomy referring consistently to Sinai as Horeb, for instance. In other cases, several stations of Israel's journey are likely subsumed under a single regional designation, such as the Wilderness of Peiran, an explanation mentioned by Mildrem.

That there are 42 stations on the journey is interesting. As Wenham notes, patristic commentators such as Ambrose and Jerome noted that there are the same number of generations in the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew chapter 1. 42 is a number that occurs in other symbolic contexts in Scripture, not least in Revelation chapter 11 verse 2 and 13 verse 5. There it refers to the period of the beast's authority and the trampling of the holy city, 42 months. 42 months corresponds with 1260 days, and with a time, times and half a time, which is three and a half years, a half week of years, a broken seven. We should also recognize the importance of possibly related numbers in the broader context.

For instance, the spoil of chapter 31 is divided into two halves of 420,000 items. Considering the importance that numbers and patterns have elsewhere in the book, it is reasonable to consider whether there are any patterns to be observed in the list of this chapter. Wenham speculates that there might be.

He suggests that we should subdivide the list of locations into six sets of seven, six weeks of locations as it were, and line them up against each other. When we do so, he believes that some symmetries might emerge. He notes, for instance, the resemblances between the first and second cycles.

The first location in each is associated with a miracle, the death of the firstborn and the provision of manna and quail. The fourth is associated with military victories over the Egyptians and the Amalekites. The sixth is associated with abundant water and abundant food.

[8 : 44] The seventh is associated with Miriam. He writes further, in the fourth, fifth, and sixth cycles, the sixth station, Mosera in Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 6, Mount Hor, mountains of Aborim before Nebo, Numbers chapter 33 verse 47, are the scenes of Aaron and Moses' death. Mara, the site of the first water miracle, and Kadesh, site of the last provision, are both fifth in their respective cycles, Exodus chapter 15 verse 25 and Numbers chapter 20 verse 11. We might add to Wenham's list of parallels between the first and second lists. For instance, the presence of test of jealousy related events at Mara and in the wilderness of Sinai, both fifth in their sequence. We might even take such speculations further, pondering potential connections with the days of creation. All of this said, on closer examination, several of Wenham's connections seem to be relatively weak, so while they may be suggestive, I have yet to be persuaded that they can be considered anything more than loose speculations.

With such a detailed itinerary, we might initially think that the route taken by the Israelites through the wilderness would be easy to determine. However, this is definitely not the case. Determining the location of sites mentioned in the scriptures is sometimes possible when they have been the sites of continual settlement, for instance, especially when there is some continuity in their place name.

Sometimes we know topographical features of an area that might help us to narrow down the location of a site. Sometimes the name of a site itself might give clues to some of these features, suggesting the presence of a mountain, a tower, or a body of water. In the case of Elim, we are told that there were 12 springs and 70 palms, for instance, which might help us to narrow things down somewhat. Yet, in the case of almost all of the sites mentioned within the list of Numbers chapter 33, we have no idea where they could be.

It should not surprise us, as the wilderness wasn't a place of stable and settled habitation. In others, most notably the location of the Red Sea crossing of Mount Sinai, we have multiple competing candidates. These competing candidates can be assessed relative to various criteria and how well they fit various details of the text. The location of the Red Sea crossing, for instance, needs to be suitable for the safe crossing of a vast multitude with children, animals, and carts, so it needs to be relatively wide and flat.

It also needs to be suitable for the drowning of the Egyptians. It needs to be relatively near to the point of Israel's departure. Historically, this point of departure has generally been considered to be around the site of the Nile Delta in Egypt, with the crossing being situated either at the very northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, or somewhere along the present-day Suez Canal, which divides Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula. We are not helped as much as we might think by the term Red Sea. In antiquity, the Red Sea could designate an extremely large body of water, including the modern Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. Both the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba, for instance, would be part of the Red Sea.

[11 : 50] The Hebrew designation could also arguably be translated as Reed Sea. Many scholars, usually following such a translation, have located the Red Sea crossing at the bitter lakes, Timser Lake, or at one of the other shallow inland lakes between Egypt and Sinai. Some conservative Christians have resisted such interpretations on account of their supposed diminishing of the miraculous character of the Red Sea crossing. However, such theories might be perfectly consistent with the biblical record, and the dramatic and decisive deliverance that they describe, even if they would make for a less cinematic scene. The considerations of plausibility that inform such readings need not be driven by doubts about God's existence or power. Besides the need for a suitable crossing location for children, animals, and the people's belongings, we should also consider the need for a large enough body of water to account for the fact that the locusts were all driven into the Red Sea, in Exodus chapter 10, verse 19. Given the number of the locusts, this might weaken the case for one of the inland lakes, and strengthen the case for the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez. As Barry Beitzel notes, locating the crossing, especially if it was inland, is complicated by the extensive transformations of the region in the intervening period, most notably in the construction of the Suez Canal, and possibly also in changing sea levels. Wenham, for instance, suggests the possibility that the bitter lakes were formally connected to the Gulf of Suez. Large canals may already have existed in the area in Moses' day, and some scholars argue that *Pai Hahairath* could be translated as mouth of the canal.

We must also consider that, although the Red Sea crossing occurred between the fourth and the fifth locations, they camped by the Red Sea as the seventh location on their itinerary. Some more recently have argued that the crossing was of the Gulf of Aqaba, between the Sinai Peninsula and modern Saudi Arabia, rather than in the Gulf of Suez. Such a position is often driven by a belief that Mount Sinai is located in modern Arabia, rather than in the Sinai Peninsula. This position is informed by the belief that Mount Sinai was in the territory of Midian, and sometimes also by the Apostle Paul's reference to Mount Sinai being in Arabia. The latter detail can be accounted for by the broader territory that Arabia could designate in antiquity, one that includes the Sinai Peninsula. While Moses shepherded flocks near Mount Sinai during his sojourn with Jethro and Midian, we are not told that Sinai was in Jethro's land. Indeed, when Jethro visited Moses at Sinai, he left to return to his own land. Shepherds and herdsmen could range over large regions, and it seems most likely to me that Sinai was near the west coast of the peninsula that later came to be named after it, a region in which it has traditionally been situated. There are various criteria that candidates for Mount Sinai should meet. It needs to be a suitable location for the multitude of Israel to camp for a year, with vegetation for their flocks and herds. It needs to be on a typical route between Midian and Egypt, as it was a meeting place of Moses and Aaron in Exodus chapter 4 verse 27. Locations near the south of the peninsula would be much less likely for this reason. Presuming that it was the site originally intended for Israel's worship when Moses requested that Pharaoh let the people go to make a three days journey into the wilderness, it needed to be relatively near to the borders of Egypt. According to Deuteronomy chapter 1 verse 2, it's also 11 days journey from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by way of

Mount Sia. These are among the considerations that lead me to favour a location in west central Sinai. However, many people claim to be certain about radically contrary hypotheses on these questions, which should proceed with considerable caution. Besides the location of the crossing and of Mount Sinai, scholars differ over the route taken by the itinerary more generally. The task of any trying to determine the route of the Exodus will be to find the route that is most coherent and which is the most likely fit in general. Since we don't know the identity of almost all of the locations, but have at most probabilistic cases for various locations for several of them, we can't easily join the dots, as it were. Rather, our identification of the dots of specific locations may often be informed by the likeliest line of the route, which will be attracted to stronger clusters of candidates. Very few events or details are mentioned in the itinerary, which perhaps serves to accent those events and details which are. Surprisingly, events such as the giving of the law and the sin with the golden calf at Sinai are not mentioned, nor are several other key occurrences. We are informed, as in Exodus chapter 15 verse 27, that there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees in Elam. The specificity of these numbers suggests that they might be important. We noted the importance of the numbers 12 and 70 in considering the quantity of the spoil in chapter 31, with 840,000 items, $70 \times 12 \times 1,000$. 12 is the number of Israel's tribes, 70 is the number of Israel's elders in chapter 11. It's also associated with the number of the nations in chapter 10 of Genesis, and with the number of the bulls sacrificed over the Feast of Tabernacles.

We are informed that there was no water for the people to drink at Rephidim, recalling the events of Exodus chapter 17 at Massa and Meribah, where the people tested the Lord and Moses struck the rock.

This was a great symbol of the character of the wilderness period more generally, the people's testing of the Lord and the Lord's provision for them. The other location that is singled out is Mount Hor, which is presented as a turning point. Aaron dies there at the age of 123, 40 years after the departure from Egypt. This is a sort of watershed moment, as the next thing we are told, the Canaanite king of Arad learns of the coming of the people of Israel. The wilderness wanderings are about to conclude, and the conquest of the land about to begin. The event recounted here is first mentioned in Numbers chapter 21 verses 1 to 3. When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive. 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 Hormer. Why single out the death of Aaron? We might find something of an answer in a few chapters time, in chapter 35 verses 25 to 28. And the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he had fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood. For he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest.

[18:54] But after the death of the high priest, the manslayer may return to the land of his possession. Israel, like the manslayer, is in a sort of exile until the Exodus generation dies out, with Aaron the high priest being chief among the representatives of that generation, the one who memorialized them before the Lord in the tabernacle, and the one who capitulated to them in their sin with the golden calf. When he dies, they will finally be free to enter.

The chapter concludes with instructions for their entry into the land. The Lord instructs Moses to direct the people to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan, and to remove all traces of their false worship, dividing the land among the tribes. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses charges the people concerning the entry into the land at great length. There is a very solemn warning attached, however.

If Israel fails to drive out the inhabitants of the land, and to uproot their false worship, they will be afflicted by them. The warning given here is similar to that which Joshua gives in Joshua chapter 23 verses 11 to 13, at the end of his ministry. Be very careful therefore to love the Lord your God. For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you, and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them, and they with you, know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. But they shall be a snare, and a trap for you, a whip on your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from after this good ground that the Lord your God has given you. Tragically, this would come to pass, as the Lord declares in Judges chapter 2 verse 1 to 3. Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokhim. And he said, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land. You shall break down their altars. But you have not obeyed my voice.

What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you. Israel did not succeed in possessing all of the land, falling short of entering into its full inheritance on account of their unfaithfulness.

They were afflicted by the people of the land, as they compromised with their idolatries. A question to consider. Jacob Milgram comments upon the literary symmetry to be observed within verses 50 to 56. How do verses 55 and 56 invert verses 52 and 53? What might we learn by reading them in juxtaposition with each other?