

Numbers 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 10 May 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 9. And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, Let the people of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time. On the fourteenth day of this month at twilight, you shall keep it at its appointed time. According to all its statutes and all its rules, you shall keep it.

So Moses told the people of Israel that they should keep the Passover, and they kept the Passover in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai, according to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so the people of Israel did. And there were certain men who were unclean through touching a dead body, so that they could not keep the Passover on that day, and they came before Moses and Aaron on that day. And those men said to him, We are unclean through touching a dead body. Why are we kept from bringing the Lord's offering at its appointed time among the people of Israel? And Moses said to them, Wait, that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If any one of you or of your descendants is unclean through touching a dead body, or is on a long journey, he shall still keep the Passover to the Lord. In the second month, on the fourteenth day at twilight, they shall keep it. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They shall leave none of it until the morning, nor break any of its bones. According to all the statute for the

Passover, they shall keep it. But if anyone who is clean, and is not on a journey, fails to keep the Passover, that person shall be cut off from his people, because he did not bring the Lord's offering at its appointed time. That man shall bear his sin. And if a stranger sojourns among you, and would keep the Passover to the Lord, according to the statute of the Passover, and according to its rules, so shall he do, you shall have one statute, both for the sojourner and for the native. On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was always, the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped. At the command of the Lord, the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the Lord, they camped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the Lord, and did not set out. Sometimes the cloud was a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of the Lord, they remained in camp.

Then according to the command of the Lord, they set out, and sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning. And when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out, or if it continued for a day and a night. When the cloud lifted, they set out. Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp, and did not set out. But when it lifted, they set out. At the command of the Lord, they camped, and at the command of the Lord, they set out. They kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by Moses. In Numbers chapter 9, Israel's stay at Mount Sinai is nearing its end.

They will soon be leaving the place and moving on. However, before they do so, they are instructed to celebrate the Passover. The Passover was first instituted in Egypt, back in Exodus chapter 12.

[3 : 21] In commemoration of the Exodus, the first month of Israel's year was the month of their departure from Egypt, although the celebration of the Passover didn't occur until the 14th day at twilight.

We might perhaps connect the delay in the beginning of the year with the various 14-day, or year periods of cleansing or preparation, or of testing that we find in scripture. For instance, the 14 days prior to leaving the ark, the 14 days in the testing for leprosy, or the 14 days of cleansing for the woman who gives birth to a daughter.

The feast of Passover occurs in the very middle of the first month, starting at the very end of the 14th day at twilight, and continuing into the 15th day. The events described in this chapter occur around the same time as the events of the final chapter of Exodus, and chapters 8 to 10 of Leviticus, where the priests were ordained. On the first eight days of the month, the tabernacle was consecrated for service, and the priests were ordained. By the 12th day, the offerings of the chiefs of the tribes had been offered.

Around the same time, the Levites were set apart and devoted to the service of the tabernacle. The book of Numbers begins with the census, which is dated to the first day of the second month of the second year after the Exodus. The events recorded in this chapter then, at the time of the Passover of the first month, precede the events with which the book begins.

The Passover that occurred in this chapter was the first Passover after the initial one, the first Passover to memorialise the deliverance from Egypt. Consequently, it would have had a distinct character for the Israelites. What was initially a feast celebrated in the uncertain midst of the process of the Lord's deliverance, now recalls that deliverance, and anticipates its full out working in the future. The Passover, while given in the context of the Exodus, is arguably chiefly concerned with ongoing practice and commemoration, something that might be hinted at in the way that Exodus chapter 12 breaks with the immediacy of the narrative progression, to present a retrospective vantage point upon the Passover's institution. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, we already knew that they were in the land of Egypt. Why mention that unless we're, as it were, looking back into the land of Egypt from a situation outside of it? Much of the book of Exodus focuses upon the institutions that will perpetuate the import of the deliverance from Egypt within the ongoing life of the people. At this point in the book of Numbers, the outliving of the institutionalised meaning of Israel's deliverance is developing in momentum. From the foundational encounter with the

[5 : 55] Lord at Sinai, the continuing worship of the tabernacle is getting underway. Recalling the great deliverance of the first Passover in Egypt, the continuing annual practice of the Passover is now beginning. Israel will again celebrate a great national Passover in Joshua chapter 5, after they enter into the promised land. The people are here instructed to keep the Passover at its appointed time, according to all its statutes and rules. These statutes and rules are given for us in Exodus chapter 12, verses 1 to 11. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, this month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you.

Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month, every man shall take a lamb according to their father's houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons, according to what each can eat, you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male, a year old.

You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roast it, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning. Anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it, with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover.

It is not clear whether the Israelites would have placed blood on their doorposts in this celebration, presumably on the entrance to their tents. Later in Israel's history, as they were settled in the land, would celebrate Passover as a pilgrimage feast. This placing of blood on the doorposts would not have been possible to practice for most, as they would have been far from their homes. Where the statutes and rules of the Passover are spelled out in relation to the alternative Passover celebration in the second month. The statutes do not include the blood on the doorposts, or the eating with the belt fastened and sandals upon one's feet. Most of the people face a problem on this occasion.

[8 : 19] This is one of a few examples of a difficult case faced by the leaders of the people, which needs to be referred to the Lord for his judgment. Whereas the celebration of the Passover in Egypt occurred in the context without extensive purity laws, after all of the legislation of Leviticus and Numbers concerning purity and defilement, the people now need to address situations where people are not able to celebrate the Passover on account of uncleanness, here on account of touching a dead body. The existence of such uncleanness for some of the people would be practically unavoidable.

Even if not a case of accidental defilement, such as that described in the case of the Nazarite in Numbers chapter 6, someone had to bury the bodies of the dead. The Lord makes an allowance for persons who, for good cause, were not able to celebrate the Passover in the first month.

They would have the opportunity to do so in the second month, upon the same middle day of the month. However, if they failed to celebrate the Passover on that occasion, or did not celebrate on the regular occasion without justifiable cause, they would be held guilty before the Lord.

Here we see an example of a concession to circumstance and necessity in the law. It can be consistent with the law to make allowances for certain exceptional circumstances and situations, yet such exceptions do not negate the rules. The Lord here also allows for sojourners to celebrate the Passover with the people, provided that they are prepared to do so according to its rule. One aspect of this rule, as we see in Exodus chapter 12 verses 43 to 49, would be the circumcision of them and their household. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, this is the statute of the Passover, no foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. No foreigner or hired worker may eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house. You shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. All of the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it. He shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native, and for the stranger who sojourns among you. To this point, the book of Numbers has devoted many chapters to discussion of the numbering and ordering of the camp of Israel, to the arrangement of the twelve tribes, each with their signs and leading tribes around the tabernacle, and the placement of the Levite clans and the priests at the four cardinal directions immediately around the tabernacle in their midst. Chapter 9 concludes with an account of the manner of Israel's movements, and the way in which they were orchestrated by the glory cloud of the Lord's presence in their midst.

We have a similar, yet shorter description of this at the end of Exodus, in chapter 40 verses 34 to 38. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

[11:07] And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all of the house of Israel throughout all their journeys. In their movements, the people follow the Lord's leading. With chapter 10, the end of chapter 9 describes the manner of the people's departure and movement on from Sinai.

Their actual departure is recounted in the chapter that follows. The responsiveness to the Lord's initiative and guidance described here is presented in a very positive manner.

A question to consider. Can you think of examples where we might apply the principle of accommodation to necessity and circumstance in relationship to the worship of the Lord that is here applied to the celebration of the Passover?

