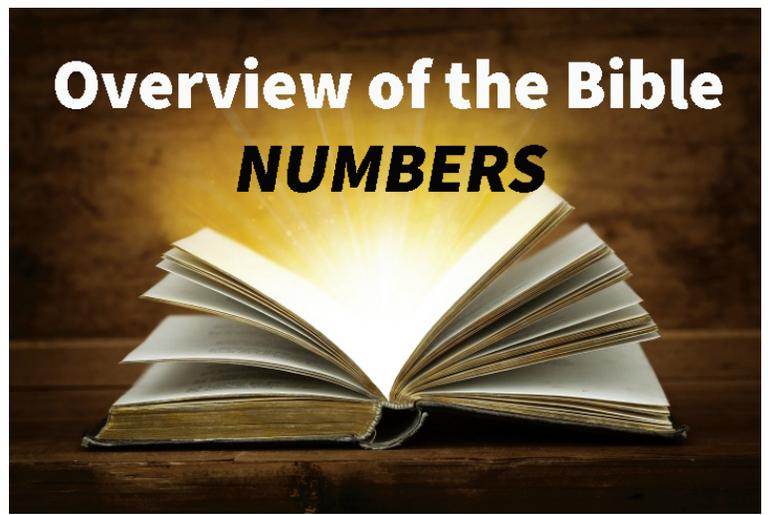


NUMBERS:
From Kadesh to Moab
Numbers 25-30 – Lesson 34
Wednesday, March 3, 2021



Baal-Peor (ch. 25)

The Israelites have now reached Shittim, east of the Jordan and almost directly across the river from Jericho. This is the place from which Joshua sent out the two spies (Josh 2:1). Numbers 31:16 inform us that Balaam devised the scheme to get the Israelites involved in sexual debauchery with *"the daughters of Moab."* He is as eminently successful in this as he was unsuccessful in his attempt to place a curse on Israel. Where the potency of spell fails, the potency of seduction succeeds. Where the indirect approach falters, the frontal attacks take over. Ruth, a Moabite, later provides a stunning contrast with the Moabite women of Numbers 25.

The Israelites, again reflecting their insensitivity to matters moral and spiritual, are only too happy to become involved with the daughters of Moab. Thus, an unholy alliance is created between the sons of God and the daughters of men (Gen. 6:1-4). God's first response is anger against Israel. Divine anger eventually leads to the outbreak of a plague (v. 9), but the narrative indicates that the repercussions might have been significantly reduced had the divine mandate been followed. Some scholars are bothered by the fact that the Lord's directive *"take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the Lord"* (25:4) is ignored by Moses. He orders the judges to kill those who have *'yoked'* themselves/joined in worship to Ball of Peor [god of fire] (v. 5). In other words, what Moses orders had nothing at all to do with what God has ordered. As a result, many who might have been spared (v. 4) were not (v. 9). If that is the case, then we have another illustration of Moses attempting to improve on God's plan. Or at least revise it. Both times the consequences are tragic.

Why does the Lord specify that the *'chiefs of the people'* should be impaled? Two possibilities come to mind. This may be an example of vicarious punishment in which the innocent suffers for the guilty, here the innocent being those with social power who did not restrain those under their authority—that is, the sins of the children being visited upon the fathers. Or it may be that the *'chiefs of the people'* were indeed the ringleaders, one of whom is identified as Zimri the Simeonite (v. 14).

More than half of the chapter, vv. 6-15, is given to the act of unfaithfulness by one Israelite, Zimri, and the intuitive response to that apostasy by one of Israelite, Phinehas, grandson of Aaron. Here the focus is on the individual trespasser, not the people, and on the individual vindicator, not Moses and the judges.

A Second Census and Questions about Inheritance (26-27)

On the heels of an act of apostasy (ch. 25) comes an extended census, a second one akin to that described in ch. 1. Registrants in this census include those who are the descendants of the Israelites who came out of Egypt (v. 4b), but who are aged twenty and older, the minimum age for inclusion in the first census.

The immediate purpose of his survey is to provide statistical data for allotting the land after it has been conquered (vv. 52-56). That in itself is interesting, since there is formidable opposition ahead. God's look to the future is different from that of the spies. The spies say, *"we are unable to take the land";* God says, *"You will take*

the land." To that end, Israel can confidently begin preparations and sense nothing premature in doing so. Thus, the census of ch. 26 anticipates occupation of the land of Palestine. The juridical innovation of ch. 27 likewise looks into the future with optimism.

The second half of the chapter deals with the commissioning of Joshua to succeed Moses (27:12-23). Its position at this point in Numbers is quite natural. This census detailed the second generation. The daughters of Zelophehad are the successors to their father. Moses too needs an heir, not biological but functionally. The first generation will become casualties in the wilderness because of their sins. God has raised up a second generation to set foot in the land of promise. Similarly, the first leader will join the first generation outside the land. Joshua is a new leader for a new generation.

A Religious Calendar and Vows (28-30)

The first two categories of this unit describe the various offerings that Israel is to give the Lord. In all, eight different occasions are highlighted. Thus, the second generation receives in chs. 28-29 a reminder that *"My times are in your hand"* (Ps. 31:15). Worship is to punctuate everyone's schedule daily (Num. 28:1-8), weekly (28:9-10), monthly (28:11-15), seasonally (28:16-29:40).

Israel's offerings to the Lord are to be in the form of animals, fine flour, oil, and wine. Numbers 28-29 provide us with an exact number of each, or quantity of each, that is to be given for the specific occasion.

The number of animals offered as whole burnt offerings out numbers those offered as sin offerings. In the studies of Leviticus, we saw that the whole burnt offering, unlike the sin offering, is not primarily expiatory in purpose; rather, it is an expression of praise and gratitude. This, then, earmarks the outstanding characteristics of Hebrew worship.

It is somewhat unexpected, therefore, to read in ch. 30, the last part of this unit, that a father may overrule an unmarried daughter's vows to the Lord (vv. 3-5). [The mention of vows at the end of ch. 29 (v. 39) provides a smooth bridge into the larger discussion of vows in ch. 30]. Similarly, a husband may nullify the religious vows of his wife, even if the wife made the vow while unmarried and still living with her father (vv. 6-8). The exception to this is the widows or the divorcee (v. 9). The fourth ruling in this chapter on vows is that a husband can annul any vow his wife makes if he does so on the day he learns of it (vv. 10-12).

There is one thing in the woman's favor: the husband or father must respond negatively, if he chooses to do so, on the very day he hears about his wife's or daughter's vow (vv. 5, 8, 12, 14). To delay a response to some later time means that the man becomes vicariously culpable: *"he shall bear her iniquity"* (v. 15).

The right of a male (father, husband) to overrule a vow of a female (daughter, wife) seems to reinforce the headship of men. Two observations may be made for overthrowing vows. First, the reasons why a father/husband may annul a daughter/wife vow is that in the majority of instances ultimate responsibility for fulfilling them fall upon the father/husband, since in most cases a vow is fulfilled through sacrifice. Second, as with many legal arrangements in the OT, there is no reference in biblical narrative to any husband/father actually overruling a vow of a wife/daughter.