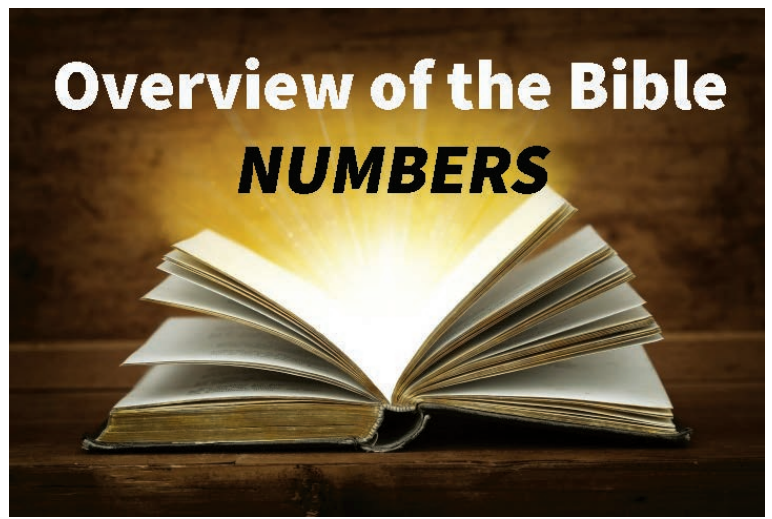


NUMBERS:
From Kadesh to Moab
Numbers 31-36 – Lesson 35
Wednesday, March 10, 2021



Concluding Events in Moab (31-36)

I will briefly note the last events in Numbers. The first subunit is God's command to conduct a holy war against Midian (ch. 31) as retaliation for the latter's seduction of Israel into acts of harlotry and idolatry. The reason is that the Lord's 'vengeance' may be displayed against Midian (31:2-3). "Vengeance" does not mean revenge or pique, but rather the legitimate expression of divine authority when that authority is challenged.

Two major concerns dominate this chapter. One is the concern for the ritual purity of the soldiers (v.v. 19-24, 50), a concentrated theme in different contexts in Numbers. In an otherwise gruesome chapter, where only young virgin girls may be spared v. 18, and not even young boys are exempted (v. 17). Numbers 31 makes the point that war is a defiling activity. A second concern is that a percentage of the spoil taken in war is to go to both sanctuary and the Levites (vv. 25-24).

The second subunit is ch. 32. Various territories east of the Jordan are allotted to Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh, with the provision that they assist the other tribes in the conquest of Canaan. If Canaan is to be taken, all of God's people must participate. There is no room for spectators, only for soldiers. In both chs. 31 and 32 Moses becomes angry over the people's failure to do something. In 31:4 he is angry because the people did not carry the war far enough. In 32:14 he is angry because the Transjordan tribes seem unwilling to fight in concert with their compatriots on the west side of the Jordan.

The third subunit is ch. 33, a stage-by-stage description of Israel's itinerary from Egypt to the plains of Moab. This is one chapter whose orientation is principally toward the past, and as such, it is surrounded by materials whose orientation is principally toward the future. True, the chapter is narrated without commentary of homiletical addenda, but the facts speak for themselves. The God who guided will guide. But this must not encourage complacency in the people, hence the concluding exhortation in vv. 50-56.

The fourth subunit is ch. 34. It describes the boundaries of the Promise Land (vv. 1-15) and identifies the individuals who are to oversee the division of the land among the tribes (vv. 16-29). Most interesting is the extension of the northern boundary to Lebo-Hamath (v. 8) and the extension of the southern boundary to Kadesh-barnea (v. 4). More than likely the north-south border "from Dan to Beersheba" covers only the arable land. Equally interesting is the omission of any land east of the Jordan (v. 12); an interesting fact coming on the heels of two and one half of the tribes requesting permanent settlement on the east side of the Jordan (ch. 32). This is rather irrelevant for Moses. He will play no part in this. His successor has already been selected.

The fifth subunit is ch. 35. Once Canaan, the Israelites are to set up forty-eight Levitical cities (vv. 1-8), as well as six cities of refuge (vv. 9-15) to which a manslayer may flee to escape blood revenge (vv. 16-34). Once again, the ultimate concern voiced here is that of purity and holiness. If God's regulation on the taking of life are not enforced, the land will be polluted (v. 33) and defiled (v. 34).

The last subunit is ch. 36, which deals with potential problems when the family inheritance goes not to a male heir but to a female heir. What if she marries outside her tribe (v. 3)? As in ch. 27, a new law is formulated to meet this contingency. Tribal intermarriage is to be denied to a woman if she is an heir (vv. 6-8). Subsequently, the daughters of Zelophehad are held up as paragons of obedience (vv. 10-12); a refreshing change from many of the lackluster and sorry models that we have encountered thus far, and on this positive note Numbers concludes. That they happily marry their paternal first cousins (v. 11) show that they had a much more positive relationship with them than did Moses with his paternal first cousin Korah (ch. 16).

Presumably, 36:1-13 could have come right after 27:1-11 (inheritance of property by females, followed immediately by marriage options for such women). How might we explain the separation of ch. 36 from ch. 27? Had the elders been brooding over Moses' edict in ch. 27 for some time, or did it suddenly dawn on them that the solution to the problem in ch. 27 now created a new problem whose loophole must be closed? Or might we have an inclusion, a kind of matching bookends, usually involving repetition, to a discourse unit of Scripture that highlight a theological point? The two narratives about these five daughters frame the intermediary material, which points to their dynamic confidence in God. The women are not passive; they are bold. They believe that faithfulness to God rather than gender guarantees the blessing of land inheritance to the next generation. Unlike the so-called prodigal son (Lk. 15:12), they do not ask that their share of the estate be given them now. They will wait for God's timing, and so they wait until Joshua 17:36.