

Numbers 15: Time Out

In the first ten chapters of the book of Numbers, the Israelites are preparing for their journey through the wilderness from Mount Sinai to the promised land of Canaan. In these chapters, the Israelites are shown, among other things, taking a census of all their “war-ready” male warriors (Chapter 1), ordering the war camp (Chapter 2); counting and commissioning the Levites for service at the tabernacle (Chapter 3, 4); ensuring the purity of the camp (Chapter 5, 9); setting up, anointing, and consecrating the tabernacle (Chapters 7, 8); and preparing to embark on the journey (Chapter 10). Throughout the first ten chapters of Numbers, God commands Moses and the Israelites to do something and they do it exactly “as the Lord commanded” (cf. 1:54; 2:34; 4:49; 8:22; 9:23).

In chapters 11-14, however, the Israelites begin to rebel against God and Moses. They complain that they do not have enough meat to eat (11:4). They question Moses’ leadership (cf. 12:2; 14:2-4) and accuse God of leading them out of Egypt into the wilderness to die (14:2-3). They no longer have faith that God will fulfill God’s promise and lead them into the land “flowing with milk and honey.” This theme of rebellion will continue in chapter 16 as Korah the Levite, along with Dathan, Abiram, and 250 other Israelite leaders challenge the authority and holiness of Moses and Aaron (16:1-3).

In between chapters 14 and 16 lies a chapter that, at first glance, seems to be misplaced. It is a chapter filled with commandments and cultic-ritual ordinances for how offerings and sacrifices are to be made before God. This chapter documents, in great detail, what offerings are

to be made, why they are to be made, and for whom they are to be made. It also details who should make the offerings and who is excluded from the benefits of the offerings.

As Dennis Olson points out in his commentary on the book of *Numbers*:

Many scholars have failed to see any connection between the laws in chapter 15 and the surrounding narratives. Some have even called Numbers “the junk room of the Bible.” They assume that later writers haphazardly threw surplus laws and traditions such as chapter 15 into scattered sections of the book of Numbers with little forethought or interconnection, much like throwing scattered odds and ends into a disorganized closet.¹

Katharine Sakenfeld is one scholar who seems to read Numbers 15 in this way. In her commentary, *Journeying with God*, Sakenfeld introduces her thoughts on Numbers 15 by saying, “Abruptly the narrative sequence of chapters 10-14 is interrupted by a *miscellaneous series of cultic regulations* [emphasis mine], most (as in chapters 5 and 9) supplementing legislation prescribed earlier in Exodus or Leviticus.”²

Unlike Sakenfeld, Olson believes there are “cohesive” elements in chapter 15 that connect it both “internally” (the ordinances flow naturally from one to the other within the chapter) and “externally” (the ordinances are interconnected with the larger narrative in chapters 11-14 and 16) within the book of Numbers. He argues that chapter 15 was intended to act as a “timeout” or “break in the action” in order to halt the rebellious activity of the Israelites in the wilderness and remind them of God and God’s promise to deliver them into the promised land. According to Olson, Numbers 15 is about the Israelites “stopping and taking stock, remembering what has been forgotten, and receiving encouragement in the face of despair.”³

Olson does make a convincing argument in regards to the “internal” and “external” cohesiveness of Numbers 15. Internally, the ordinances are all about what human actions are

¹ Olson, Dennis T. *Numbers: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996), 91.

² Sakenfeld, Katharine. *Journeying with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 93.

³ Olson, 90.

pleasing and displeasing to God. Externally, the chapter functions as a way to stem the tide of rebellion and put the focus of the Israelites back on God.

The chapter begins by documenting how the Israelites are to make offerings by fire, whether burnt offerings to fulfill a vow or freewill offerings, before God (15:1-13). The chapter continues by documenting how resident aliens (*ger*) living in Israel's war camp should follow the same commandments as the Israelites when making an offering by fire before God (15:14-16); how the Israelites should offer the "first fruits" of their grain production (bread/dough) to God (15:17-21); and how the priests should make atonement for the "unintentional sins" of individuals and the community (including resident aliens) by offering animal, grain, and drink offerings to the Lord (15:22-29). Through repetition, the text announces that by observing these ordinances the Israelites will be making a "pleasing odor to the Lord" (vv. 3, 10, 13, 14, 24).

The terms "pleasing odor" (New Revised Standard Version) or "sweet savour" (King James Version) are translated from the Hebrew words *nichowach* and *reyach*. When used together, these terms refer to "an odor of sacrifice being offered up to God." In his article, *Sacrifices and Offerings*, in the Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible, Gary Anderson describes the burnt offering (*ʾôlâ*) as the "daily food of the deity."⁴ He says, "At its most basic level, the *ʾôlâ* was considered a gift to the deity, which the deity consumes as a 'soothing odor.'"⁵

The idea of making a pleasing odor to God through offering and sacrifice has roots in the Pentateuchal narrative outside of the book of Numbers. The phrase is first used in Genesis 8:21 when Noah offers a burnt offering to God after he and his family emerge safely from the ark. The phrase is also found in the legal material in both Exodus and Leviticus.⁶ In these instances,

⁴ Anderson, Gary. "Sacrifices and Offerings," *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible*, David Noel Freedman et. al, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1149.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See specifically Exod. 29:18 and Lev. 1:9.

burnt offerings or pleasing odors are being made to God to offer thanksgiving, request peace and well being, or make atonement for sin.

According to Anderson, the sacrificial system of ancient Israel was both “sacramental” and deeply relational. He says:

The laws of sacrifice presume a sacramental mentality that believes that God makes his (*sic*) presence manifest within the confines of the material world (Exod. 20:24). Rituals such as sacrifice evolved to help concretize the manner in which the deity was truly present in the human community.⁷

Since the Israelites believed that God was truly present and residing in their midst, they developed an elaborate sacrificial system to honor, serve, and worship Yahweh. By attending to God’s daily needs for food and purity through sacrifice, the Israelites were constantly reminded of the manifest presence of God in their midst.

In the book of Numbers, God’s presence resides in the tabernacle or tent of meeting that travels with the Israelites as they journey through the wilderness. God’s holy presence, however, had both positive and negative implications for the Israelites. By agreeing to reside in the tabernacle within the midst of the people, God was expressing God’s love for the Israelites. Through this act, God was telling the Israelites that they would not be alone on their journey through the wilderness; God would be there to guide them and protect them. The Israelites, however, could not take God’s presence for granted. According to scholars such as Olson and Richard Nelson, the Israelites believed God’s presence to be like a pulsating, volatile energy that human beings could not control.⁸ This energy symbolized God’s radical holiness and love, but it was also seen as a dangerous force that had the power to destroy the entire Israelite community (cf. Num. 11:1-3). Only certain chosen people within the community, the priests, were able to

⁷ Anderson, 1148.

⁸ Olson, 17.

address this power, through ritual and sacrifice, in hopes of harnessing the beneficial aura of God's energy for the good of the entire community (cf. Num. 15:25-26).

The ultimate goal of the sacrificial system in ancient Israel was to provide for the needs of Yahweh so that Yahweh could remain within the midst of the people. Yahweh's greatest need was a need for purity. It is for this reason that "sin" and "impurity" became regarded as dangerous problems within the Israelite community. Sin and impurity were seen as "magnetic contaminants" that could attach themselves to the inner sanctum of the tabernacle, polluting God's holy residence. The Israelites believed that if the tabernacle became too polluted with the "stains" of sin and impurity, then God would be forced to leave the presence of the community.

As Richard Nelson says in his book, *Raising Up A Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology*, "Much of the Israelite ritual system can be understood in terms of a need to 'decontaminate' persons and objects from the uncleanness acquired in the course of ordinary life. Without such means to achieve purity, worship life would have been impossible."⁹ He adds that in order to purify themselves, Israelites needed to be "purged" of what the Hebrew Bible calls "sin" (*hatta*) and "guilt" (*awon*).¹⁰ Nelson is quick to point out, however, that the Israelites did not view sin and guilt in the same moral and psychological terms as we do today. He says they are better understood as "objective attributes." Nelson says, "One acquired sin and guilt in the course of life, some of it deliberately to be sure, but most of it inadvertently... through the unintentional violation of behavioral norms."¹¹

In order to purge the Israelite's of their sin and guilt, atonement had to be made to God, predominantly through ritual sacrifice. As Nelson says, "The verb *atone* (root *kpr* in Hebrew)

⁹ Nelson, Richard D. *Raising Up A Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 73.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 73-74.

implies the removal of an alien force by wiping it off, or perhaps covering it over. To atone also meant to remove a barrier or an obstacle to a relationship.”¹² Most atonement was made through blood sacrifices because blood was perceived as a powerful cleansing element in ancient Israel. Nelson says, “Blood served as a ritual detergent that erased impurity and sin, thus eliminating barriers that obstructed the relationship between Israel and Yahweh.”¹³ This blood, however, was not used to cleanse or purify individual persons of their own personal sin, but instead to purify God’s holy residence, the tabernacle. As Nelson points out:

Atonement [sacrifices] dealt not only with the defilement and sin of the guilty person, but also with the impurity that had become attached to the holy altar and sanctuary and that threatened God’s presence there. Human sin defiled holy space and holy things and, unless cleaned off or covered over, threatened to generate the ‘holy-unclean fusion reaction’ and bring on Yahweh’s wrath.¹⁴

It is into this context of ancient Israelite ritual sacrifice and atonement that the reader is thrust in Numbers 15. In 15:21-29, God speaks to Moses and tells him how to make atonement for the “unintentional” sins of the community (vv. 22-26) and for the “unintentional” sins of individuals within the community (vv. 27-29). These sins would be what Nelson refers to as the “inadvertent violations of behavioral norms.” In essence, they are violations of the Mosaic Law that are committed either out of ignorance or lack of understanding by the Israelites.

Sins committed “high-handedly” or intentionally against God, however, could not be atoned for according to Numbers 15:30-31. The text states that, “Whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the Lord and shall be cut off from among the people” (15:30). The phrase “cut off,” translated from the Hebrew term *karath*, describes a process of social and spiritual extermination rather than physical extermination. To be cut off in ancient Israel meant that a person was “driven out” of the Israelite family and removed from the

¹² Ibid., 75.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 75-76.

blessings and promises of the Divine covenant with Yahweh. These high-handed or intentional sins were viewed as the “ultimate” pollutants of God’s holy residence because they “stuck” to the walls of the sanctuary and could not be removed, even with the ritual detergent of blood.

Immediately following God’s commandment to cut off all those who sin intentionally is the story of the wood gatherer (15:32-36). The story is about a man who is caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath. He is brought before Moses, Aaron, and the whole congregation to be tried for violating the Sabbath law. Moses then brings the man before God for judgment. God tells Moses to take the man outside the camp and have him stoned to death. The story ends with Moses carrying out God’s judgment upon the wood gatherer.

The story of the wood gatherer is problematic for modern readers because it seems to depict the judgment rather than the mercy of God. Looking at it in isolation, it does become a troublesome text or even a “text of terror” because God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness seem nowhere to be found. Many modern interpreters of this text see it as an instance of God denying forgiveness and salvation to an individual (the wood gatherer). This perplexes many readers because it does not mesh with the image of the gracious, loving, and forgiving God that they see in other parts of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. This text, however, was probably not so troubling for an ancient Israelite audience. They would have seen God’s mercy and grace in the judgment against the wood gatherer. By cutting off the wood gatherer and condemning him to death, God was protecting the purity of the entire Israelite community from being stained by the sins of one individual. By removing the “high-handed” sinner from amongst the people, God was “decontaminating” the community so that God and God’s holiness could remain within the midst of the Israelite community.

Numbers 15 concludes with God telling Moses to command the Israelites to tie a blue cord or tassel (*tsitsit* in Hebrew) to the fringes of their garments to remind them of God and God's commandments. The *tsitsit* are to act as visual reminders to the Israelites to follow God's commandments and not to sin by following the "lusts" of their own hearts and eyes (15:39). The *tsitsit* are also meant to remind the Israelites to whom it is that they belong. For as the final verse of Numbers 15 makes clear to the Israelites, "I [Yahweh] am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God" (15:41).

It appears that Numbers 15 does function, as Olson alludes to, as a "time out" or "break in the action" from the rebellious activity of the Israelites in chapters 11-14 and 16. It is not hard to imagine God reacting to the Israelites in the same way a basketball coach would react to seeing his/her team blow a large lead late in the game. In basketball, when things are not going your way, the coach must call a time out in order to get all of the players back on the same page. Throughout the Israelites journey in the wilderness, God has been faithful to God's promise to protect the people and lead them safely to the promised land. In Numbers 13-14, however, the Israelites begin to doubt whether God can fulfill God's promises. They begin to lose hope of ever entering and inhabiting the promised land. Instead, they begin to curse God and Moses and make plans to return to Egypt. It is at this point that God decides to call a time out. In Numbers 15, God brings the Israelites over to the "bench" and proceeds to layout a game plan that will help get them back on track as a community and repair their now fractured relationship with Yahweh. As the reader will see in chapter 16, the game plan is not executed the way the coach (God) drew it up. The rebellion of the Israelites continues in chapter 16 and ultimate defeat looms large over the heads of the old wilderness generation of the Israelites.

There are many themes in Numbers 15 that could be used for teaching and preaching in a congregational context. Some of those themes include: offering and sacrifice, ritual purity, sin and atonement, and repentance (turning to God). If I were to present this text to a congregation, I think I would teach it rather than preach it. There is a lot of socio-historical information that undergirds this text and I do not believe it could be presented adequately in a 10-15 minute sermon. I would like to teach this text in an adult education or confirmation class. The theme I would bring forth for study would be the idea of making a “pleasing odor to/for the Lord.”

I would begin the class by presenting some background information on the sacrificial system of ancient Israel (as I did above) and how it functioned as a way to feed and satiate God as well as ensure the purity of the community. Then I would ask the class how we could make pleasing odors to God today since we no longer practice the sacrificial rituals of the Israelites. My focus would be to show how we substitute prayer for the slaughtering of animals in our own form of ritual offering to God. After a brief time of class discussion, I would have the “students” work on a project together. I would have each of them make a prayer bracelet for themselves. I would explain how the bracelets act much like the *tsitsit* or tassels the Israelites wore, as a reminder that they are children of God and called to follow God’s commandments. More importantly, however, I would inform them how the bracelets create a structure and ritual way of offering our prayers (pleasing odors) to God.

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