

Reformation Fellowship Notes • April 14, 2019

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Handout #10

Numbers 17, 18, 19

I. Introduction

A. The main issue in this middle section of Numbers is who has God-given authority?

1. Chapters 16-17 are dealing with the question of who has been granted priestly authority.
 - a) Korah's rebellion
 - b) Murmuring the next day
 - c) Chapter 17
2. In chapter 17, God sets up another test to make clear to everyone that he has granted priestly authority to Aaron.
 - a) There is no revolt that God is responding to in this case.
 - b) All at God's initiative
3. Chapters 18-19 will spell out what will be the portions of the Levites and the priests and will give rules for dealing with the uncleanness coming from contact with corpses.

B. The Korah rebellion did not settle the issue.

1. Korah and other leaders of the rebellion were swallowed by the earth.
2. The next day the people of Israel blamed Moses and Aaron for the deaths of Korah and the 250.

"You are the ones who have caused the death of the Lord's people." (16:41)

- a) Somehow Moses and Aaron were responsible for the earth opening up and swallowing the rebels.
3. The people seemed to still think that Korah and the 250 were holy ones.
4. Then 14,700 died in a plague that was stopped by Aaron taking a censer and standing between the living and the dead.
5. So God initiated another test.

II. Numbers 17:1-5

A. It is not clear when this takes place.

1. I suspect it was relatively soon after Korah's rebellion.

- a) The fears expressed in 17:12-13 suggest that this was soon in the wake of all the deaths.
- b) Chapter 19 deals with the uncleanness from contact with corpses.
- B. Unlike the first two incidents which proved the right of Aaron's claim to the priesthood, this one does not begin with grumbling.
- C. The leader of every tribe is to bring a staff with his name on it.
 - 1. Hebrew *matteh* can mean "tribe" or "staff."
 - 2. Even the tribe of Levi was required to have a staff represented.
 - a) Aaron's name was to be written on it.
 - (1) Why was Aaron specified as the leader of the tribe of Levi?

The name of Aaron is to be inscribed on Levi's rod. This verse is meant to show that Aaron was God's choice to be the leader of the Levites. This is an interesting choice since Aaron is a descendant of Levi's *second* son, Kohath, and because Moses himself was also a Levite. Thus the leadership in view here is only the priesthood; it is not a challenge to Moses' own role as leader. (Ashley, p. 331)

- (a) The issue is who is authorized to be priest.
- b) Why did God go out of his way to mention Levi?

The consistent practice of Numbers, however, is to count twelve secular tribes in addition to Levi,¹⁸ and unless one wishes to suppose a standpoint at odds with the rest of the book, one should probably see Levi as a thirteenth tribe (and rod) here. (Ashley, p. 332)

- 3. Staffs were to be placed in the Tabernacle in front of Ark of Covenant.
 - a) Where God meets with Moses
- 4. The staff of the man God chooses will sprout.
 - a) This will clearly establish once and for all to whom God has granted authority.
 - b) This will lessen this constant grumbling.
 - (1) Strangely worded
 - (2) Seems naïve
 - (a) Remember this when we get to chapter 20. It may help explain Moses' actions.

III. Numbers 17:6-7

- A. Moses collected the staffs as he was told to do.
- B. He placed the staffs in the Tabernacle.
 - 1. In front of the Ark of the Covenant

IV. Numbers 17:8-9

- A. The next day Moses went into the Tabernacle.
 - 1. Aaron's staff had sprouted, budded, blossomed, and produced almonds.

The almond comes to maturity early, hence its name “the watcher” (cf. Jer. 1:11–12).
(Ashley, p. 331)

- a) Amazing miracle
 - b) The dead wood of a staff doesn't come alive and produce buds and almonds.
 - c) And it happened overnight.
2. Moses brought the staffs out of the Tabernacle.
- a) They examined them.
 - (1) They could see for themselves the remarkable difference between their staffs and Aaron's staff.
 - (a) It happened inside the Tabernacle.
 - (b) But they could all see the outcome.
 - (c) They could see the miracle without any mediation.
 - (i) A clear stamp of approval on Aaron
 - (2) The production of food from dead wood showed that God was capable of producing food anywhere, anytime.
 - (a) Power over life and death
 - (3) The Aaronic priesthood is God's handpicked agent.
 - b) Each leader took his own staff.

V. Numbers 17:10-11

- A. Aaron's staff was to be put back in front of the ark of the covenant (Testimony)
- 1. A lasting sign of what God had done.
 - 2. A proof to the rebellious, who question the authority of Moses and Aaron.
 - 3. This will stop the grumbling.
 - a) So that they will not need to be judged and killed.
 - 4. Why put it in the tabernacle where most people can't see it?
 - a) People have to trust the word of witnesses.
- B. Moses did all this.

VI. Numbers 17:12-13

- A. The people responded with distress and fear.
- 1. If God can do that with a staff, he is awesome and scary.
 - a) Is he going to kill us all?
 - 2. We will die.
 - a) God did it so that they would not die.
 - b) God was pulling for them, not against them.
 - (1) They could not reconcile a good God with being led into the desert.
 - (2) This was very difficult for them to believe.

VII. Three challenges to Aaron's priesthood in sum

A. Comparison of the three incidents

This is the third in the group of three stories, proving the God-givenness of Aaron's priestly ministry (cf. 16:1-35, 36-50). As in the previous two, the demonstration takes two days. But there is a significant inversion in the structure of this incident compared with the first two. They begin with the people complaining and the Lord threatening to destroy them, and then comes the proof of Aaron's call. This story opens with God offering a test to show which tribe has been chosen, and ends with people crying out for mercy, *We perish, we are undone, we are all undone* (12). At last they understand, they need someone to draw near to God to make atonement for their sins on their behalf (13). Recognizing the necessity of the priesthood, they are now ready to pay for it and offer the tithes and first-fruits set out in the following chapter. (Wenham, p. 156)

B. Clarifying the distinction between the priests and the Levites

1. Levites minister in the Tabernacle; the priests intercede for the people.

The point of 16:1-35 was the superiority of the Aaronic priesthood over the other Levites. Although that point is alluded to in 17:18 (Eng. 3), the main point here is the necessity for a divinely appointed priesthood to intercede for the laity. This story, then, balances out the division between the Aaronic priests and other Levites created by 16:1-35, by exalting the Levites (esp. the family of Aaron) above the lay tribes in the matter of service of God. This brings us back to the perspective of chs. 1-4. (Ashley, p. 331)

C. Chapter 18 is written in response to the outcry in 17:12-3.

1. Can anyone approach the Tabernacle and live?

If God is going to kill anyone who comes near to the tent, then the sanest conclusion would be to separate oneself from the tent altogether. This outcry, leading as it could to the separation of Israel and Yahweh, gives rise to the new legislation that follows in ch. 18. (Ashley, p. 337)

- a) Levites and priests can approach the Tabernacle and live.

VIII. Numbers 18:1-4

A. God speaks to Aaron.

1. Everywhere else God speaks to Moses.

B. Priests and Kohathites are responsible for the protection of the Tabernacle and the priesthood.

1. Priests alone have these responsibilities.

- a) Guard against offenses against the sanctuary.
 - b) Guard against offenses against the priesthood.
2. Levites need to play their role in this.
 - a) They will help minister in the Tabernacle.
 - b) But they must never violate the sanctity of the furniture.
 - (1) The penalty will be death to Levites and priests.
 3. No one else can come near to the tent and its furnishings.

IX. Numbers 18:5-7

- A. Priests are to take care of the sanctuary so that Israel will not get judged again.
 1. Levites are a gift to Aaron and the priests.
 - a) They will serve them taking care of the Tabernacle.
 2. But only Aaron and his sons will serve in the Tabernacle.
 - a) Everything in connection with the altar and what is inside the Tabernacle
 - b) The service of the priesthood will be a gift to Aaron and the priests.
 3. The penalty for violating the sanctity of the Tabernacle will be death.
 - a) This is stated twice.

X. Numbers 18:8-10

- A. Aaron is assured that God himself has put him in charge of all offerings.
 1. Aaron and his sons get a portion of those offerings.
 - a) A portion of all offerings except for whole burnt offerings
 - (1) Eat it with reverence.
 - (2) Every male shall eat it.
 - (3) It is most holy.

XI. Numbers 18:11-20

- A. Everything devoted to the Lord is yours.
 1. Everything presented as a wave offering is for you.
 - a) Sons, daughters, and household
 - b) Whoever is ceremonially clean
 2. All the first fruits
 - a) All these offerings are of the finest quality.
 3. The firstborn of men and animals must be redeemed.
 - a) 5 shekels per person
- B. Ox, sheep, and goats cannot be redeemed.
 1. They must be sacrificed.

- a) Sprinkle the blood
 - b) Burn the fat
 - c) Breast and right thigh are yours.
2. This is an everlasting covenant of salt.
- C. Priests get no land.
1. They get only the sacrifices.

XII. Numbers 18:21-29

- A. Provision for the Levites
1. All tithes
 - a) In exchange for their work in the Tabernacle
 2. From now on, no one else can go near the Tabernacle.
 - a) “[S]hall not . . . come near again” suggests that it happened in the past.
 - (1) Did Korah encourage non-Levites to go into the Tabernacle?
 - (a) Part of his “all of the congregation are holy” theology?
 - b) If they do, they will die.
 3. They will receive no inheritance.
 4. You must tithe of what you receive.
 - a) Give the best of what you receive.
 - b) It will go to the priests.

XIII. Numbers 18:30-32

- A. After you tithe of what you receive, you get the rest.
1. You may eat it anywhere.
 2. Just make sure you give the best of what you receive.
 - a) In this way you will not defile the holy offerings.
 - b) And you will not die.

XIV. Numbers 19:1-10

- A. How do we escape the contamination from all the dead corpses?
1. Those who died in the plague
 2. Spiritual uncleanness
 3. The sacrifice of a red cow is the solution.
- B. “This is the statute of the law”
1. Only other place this phrase occurs is 31:21.
 2. Both deal with uncleanness due to contact with a corpse.
- C. Sacrifice a red heifer.
1. Characteristics

- a) Unblemished
 - b) Never been yoked
2. Procedure
- a) This is most similar to other purification rituals.
 - (1) Cleansing leper
 - (2) Cleansing a contaminated house
 - b) Slaughtered outside the camp under the supervision of the priest
 - (1) By Eleazar
 - (a) Not clear why he does it
 - (2) Sprinkles blood toward the door of the Tabernacle 7x
 - (a) In the direction of the Tabernacle
 - (3) Heifer is burned (in his sight).
 - (a) Blood, hide, flesh, and all
 - (b) Cedar, hyssop and scarlet cloth thrown in
 - c) Priest washed clothes and body.
 - (1) Then returns to camp
 - (a) But remains unclean until evening
3. Someone who is clean will gather the ashes.
- a) Puts them in a clean place outside the camp
 - b) Washes himself and clothes with water
 - c) He remains unclean until evening.
4. Ashes are mixed with water and used for ceremonial cleansing
- D. This is a perpetual statute.
- 1. For Israelites and *gerim*

XV. Numbers 19:11-13

- A. Anyone who touches a corpse will be unclean for 7 days.
- 1. He must wash himself using the water-ash mix on the third day and the seventh day.
 - 2. If one touches a corpse and does not do this, then he defiles the Tabernacle.
 - a) Largely on the honor system
 - b) Self enforcing
 - c) He should be cut off from Israel.
 - (1) He is not clean.

XVI. Numbers 19:14-19

- A. If someone dies in a tent
- 1. Anyone in the tent when it happens or who comes in later is unclean.
 - a) That person is unclean for 7 days.
 - 2. Any open container is unclean.

- B. If someone touches a corpse in the field, he is unclean.
 - 1. Or a bone or a grave of a dead person
 - 2. Intentional or unintentional
- C. The procedure
 - 1. Mix ash with flowing water in a container.
 - 2. Clean person takes hyssop and sprinkles it on tent, furnishings, and unclean persons.
 - 3. Do this on the third day and seventh day.
 - 4. On seventh day—wash himself and clothes
 - 5. He will be clean at evening.

XVII. Numbers 19:20-22

- A. Anyone who is unclean but does not do this must be cut off from the people.
 - 1. Anyone who sprinkles the water or touches the water is unclean until evening.
 - a) Must wash clothes and be unclean until evening
 - 2. Anything an unclean person touches will be unclean.
 - a) Anyone who touches it will be unclean until evening

XVIII. Conclusion

- A. Korah's rebellion had a lot of popular support.
 - 1. We see from the numbers of participants mentioned and the persistence of the rebellion.
 - 2. It appears to have blurred the distinction between Levite and priest and between the laity and the priests.
 - 3. Chapters 18 and 19 are intended to reestablish proper boundaries.
- B. Tithes and sacrifices were not monitored by any enforcement agency.
 - 1. It was self-monitored.
 - 2. If people gave their tithes and offered their first fruits and sacrifices, then the priests and Levites had plenty to eat.
 - 3. If people did not, then the priests and Levites suffered.
 - a) So the welfare of the priests and Levites became a barometer of the spiritual well-being of the nation.
- C. Jews are actively trying to breed a red heifer.
 - 1. Thought to be necessary to dedicate the third temple
- D. Why did this third incident work when the first two did not?
 - 1. Unmediated

- a) Everyone could see it and inspect it.
2. First two were rare events; third was unheard of .
 - a) The earth does open up sometimes.
 - b) Plagues do end.
 - c) Dead wood does not come back to life.
3. This one is about food production.
 - a) That has been an issue all along.
 - b) If God can make a dead stick produce food, then he can solve any food shortages.
4. No more challenges to the authority of Aaron as priest are recorded.
 - a) It did not, however, end the grumbling.