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Numbers 29

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The sacrifices of Israel's liturgical calendar continued.

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Transcript

Numbers chapter 29. Numbers chapter 29 continues the discussion of the sacrifices appropriate to particular days in Israel's calendar, which began in the preceding chapter. Chapter 28 laid out the morning and the evening sacrifices that were the backbone of Israel's worship.

On top of these, the sacrifices of the Sabbath, and then in addition to those, the sacrifices of the first of each month. These patterns of worship, the days, the weeks, the months, would then be elaborated by the sacrifices particular to specific feasts of Israel's calendar. In contrast to Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, the focus in Numbers is not upon the lay celebration of these feasts, but upon the public, central, and priestly liturgies appropriate to them.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, no mention is made of many of the sacrifices that would be proper to these feasts that would have been celebrated by lay persons. The Passover lamb is not mentioned, nor are the peace offerings, first fruits offerings, or wave offerings that would be appropriate on the Feast of Pentecost. In these chapters then, we see more of a public, central liturgy that would have integrated all of Israel's

life.

Their worship was not just the gathered worship of lots of different households, but a central, priestly worship performed in the tabernacle and later temple. In such a manner, a collective identity of Israel as a worshipping body is emerging. Israel is not just a gathering of different households as a collective.

It is the unified corporate body of a nation. Daniel Olson observes, The year is divided into twelve months. The year is also divided into two major halves, just as the day is divided into two halves of day and night, and the week into six days of work and one day of Sabbath rest, so the year has a bipartite structure.

Significant festivals in the first month mark the first half of the year, and another set of significant festivals occur in the seventh month to mark the second half of the year. The seventh month can also be thought of as the sabbatical month. There is a sort of symmetry between the two halves of the year.

The first month has a great feast of seven days, in the Feast of Unleavened Bread, from the 15th to the 21st days. The seventh month has another feast of the same kind, a seven-day feast from the 15th to the 21st day of the month, the Feast of Booths. The Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorates the cutting off of the leaven of Egypt in the Exodus.

The Festival of Booths commemorates, among other things, Israel's dwelling in tents as they left the land of Egypt. The Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, or Sukkoth, was connected with their first departure from Egypt and when they dwelt in tents for the first time with the Lord's dwelling in their midst in the pillar of cloud and fire. We should observe the fact that these commemorate the very same day.

This can be seen in Exodus chapter 12 verses 30-39. The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, we shall all be dead. So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders.

The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. And the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramses to Sukkoth, about 600,000 men on foot, besides women and children. The mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt.

For it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor

had they prepared any provisions for themselves. The fact that the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles commemorate different aspects of the same event further accents the symmetry in Israel's festal calendar. There is also a single day of celebration preceding the Feast of Unleavened Bread and a single day of celebration and holy convocation after the Feast of Tabernacles.

Israel's festal calendar then could be thought of as being bookended by these two celebrations of one day, both occurring on different sides of seven day feasts. The list of sacrifices in these two chapters has the effect of aligning the climactic character of the Feast of Tabernacles. On the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles, 70 bulls, 14 rams and 98 lambs were offered in addition to the regular sacrifices.

This quantity of animals vastly exceeded those offered at any other time of the year. Setting the Feast of Tabernacles apart is the greatest of the public celebrations of Israel's calendar. If the Feast of Passover would have foregrounded the individual households of the nation, the Feast of Tabernacles accented their existence as a corporate entity.

In the Feast of Tabernacles, Israel is seen in its full stature as a nation. Unsurprisingly, the Feast of Tabernacles was associated with some of the greatest national events, with the dedication of the Temple by Solomon and also with covenant renewal in Nehemiah chapters 8-10. Typical feast days involved the sacrifice of one ram as a burnt offering and seven lambs as burnt offerings.

On each day of the Feast of Tabernacles, two rams and fourteen lambs were offered, twice the number. If the weekly Sabbath doubled the number of sacrifices of the regular day, the Feast of Tabernacles is like the Sabbath of the festivals. In addition to the rams and lambs of the burnt offering, the Feast of Tabernacles involves a great quantity of bulls, counting down from 13 bulls offered on the first day to 7 on the seventh.

James Jordan suggests that the offering of 70 bulls over the course of the Feast might correspond with the 70 nations of Genesis chapter 10. Over the course of the year a vast quantity of animals would be sacrificed and other things offered to the Lord. Gordon Wenham writes, every year in future the priests will have to sacrifice 113 bulls, 32 rams and 1,086 lambs and offer more than a ton of flour and a thousand bottles of oil and wine.

The altar, the table of the Lord, would be richly furnished and this would be an expression of the prosperity and fertility of the land more generally. A question to consider, how can we see the number 7 and a sabbatical principle woven into Israel's more general sacrificial calendar?