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Numbers 28

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The sacrifices of Israel's liturgical calendar.

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Transcript

Numbers chapter 28. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, In the holy place you shall pour out a drink offering of strong drink to the Lord. The other lamb you shall offer at twilight, like the grain offering of the morning, and like its drink offering, you shall offer it as a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

On the Sabbath day two male lambs a year old without blemish, and two-tenths of an ephor of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, and its drink offering. This is the burnt offering of every Sabbath, besides the regular burnt offering and its drink offering. At the beginnings of your months you shall offer a burnt offering to the Lord, two bulls from the herd, one ram, seven male lambs a year old without blemish, also three-tenths of an ephor of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, for each bull, and two-tenths of fine flour for a grain offering mixed with oil, for the one ram, and a tenth of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering for every lamb, for a burnt offering with a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the Lord.

Their drink offering shall be half a hin of wine for a bull, a third of a hin for a ram, and a quarter of a hin for a lamb. This is the burnt offering of each month throughout the

months of the year. Also one male goat for a sin offering to the Lord.

It shall be offered besides the regular burnt offering and its drink offering. On the fourteenth day of the first month is the Lord's Passover, and on the fifteenth day of this month is a feast. Seven days shall unleavened bread be eaten.

On the first day there shall be a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work, but offer a food offering, a burnt offering to the Lord, two bulls from the herd, one ram, and seven male lambs a year old. See that they are without blemish.

Also their grain offerings of fine flour mixed with oil. Three-tenths of an ephor shall you offer for a bull, and two-tenths for a ram, a tenth you shall offer for each of the seven lambs. Also one male goat for a sin offering to make atonement for you.

You shall offer these besides the burnt offering of the morning, which is for a regular burnt offering. In the same way you shall offer daily for seven days the food of a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. It shall be offered besides the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.

And on the seventh day you shall have a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. On the day of the first fruits, when you offer a grain offering of new grain to the Lord at your feast of weeks, you shall have a holy convocation.

You shall not do any ordinary work, but offer a burnt offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord, two bulls from the herd, one ram, seven male lambs a year old. Also their grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil. Three-tenths of an ephor for each bull, two-tenths for one ram, a tenth for each of the seven lambs, with one male goat to make atonement for you.

Besides the regular burnt offering and its grain offering, you shall offer them and their drink offering. See that they are without blemish. Israel's worship involved a variety of kinds of sacrifice and in Numbers chapter 28 and 29 Israel is given instructions concerning appropriate sacrifices for various parts of the year.

The most basic sacrifices in Israel's life were the daily sacrifices in the morning and in the evening. There were extra sacrifices added to these every Sabbath. On the first day of every month there were further sacrifices still.

The first day of the seventh month, the principal festal month, on the Feast of Trumpets, had further additional sacrifices appointed. The sacrifices, as Gordon Wenham observes, were cumulative. Every single day would have the regular daily sacrifices.

The Sabbath would involve extra sacrifices on top of the daily sacrifices. And then yet further sacrifices would be added for the festal days. Besides these daily, weekly and monthly rhythms of sacrifice, there were sacrifices related to the celebrations of the

festal calendar, Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Booths.

The daily, weekly and monthly rhythms of sacrifice were foundational for the public worship of the tabernacle. To use liturgical terminology, this was Israel's ordinary liturgy, the set pattern that underlay everything else, the things that didn't change. The public festal sacrifices elaborated this underlying rhythm of worship.

To use liturgical language again that might be familiar to some, these were the propers, those elements that were particular to one feast or other. Upon this basis of continual, regular public sacrifice with its ordinary and proper elements, all the voluntary, private and occasional sacrifices of Israel's worship would be offered. We should observe, for instance, the absence of peace offerings in the list of the sacrifices in Numbers chapters 28 and 29.

Such offerings, even when collectively celebrated by the people on set occasions, do not appear to be considered public sacrifices of the same kind. Numbers chapters 28 and 29 are concerned with the public priestly sacrifices and not with the lay offerings, even the lay offerings of the nation as a whole. Elsewhere in the Pentateuch we find teaching concerning the various feasts of Israel's calendar, in places like Exodus chapter 23 verses 14-19, Leviticus chapter 23 and Deuteronomy chapter 16.

The differences between the instructions in these places should be noted. Comparing and contrasting them will give us a fuller sense of what Israel's feasts meant and how they were practiced. Exodus chapter 23 verses 14-19 reads, for instance, The instructions here are sparse and focus on the feasts as gatherings of all the males of the people to the Lord, each bringing their own first fruits or voluntary offerings as the Lord has prospered them and performing common acts of worship.

The instructions in Leviticus chapter 23 are far more extensive. In that passage there is still the emphasis upon common lay acts of worship, but with more of a fusion of these common acts of lay worship and public acts of worship performed by the priests in the central sanctuary on behalf of the entire nation. As an example we might consider the laws of the Feast of Weeks, elsewhere referred to as the Feast of Harvest or Pentecost.

In Leviticus chapter 23 verses 15-22 we read, You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf for the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the Lord.

You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven as first fruits to the Lord. And you shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old, without blemish, and one bull from the herd, and two rams.

They shall be a burnt offering to the Lord, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And you shall offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall waive them with the bread of the first fruits as a waive offering before the Lord, with the two lambs.

They shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall make a proclamation on the same day. You shall hold a holy convocation.

You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest.

You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner. I am the Lord your God." Much of this passage is addressed to the whole congregation of Israel, requiring each household to perform the same common lay acts of worship. However, amidst these instructions, there are also public sacrifices performed by the priests in the central sanctuary, waive offerings, ascension offerings, a purification offering, and peace offerings.

In Deuteronomy chapter 16, verses 9-12, the focus is on each household performing a common act of lay celebration on the Feast of Weeks. You shall count seven weeks. Begin to count the seven weeks from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain.

Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the Lord your God blesses you, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place that the Lord your God will choose to make His name dwell there. You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall be careful to observe these statutes. Deuteronomy says nothing about what occurs at the central sanctuary here besides the fact that the people are to gather to the place where the Lord chooses to make His name dwell.

The focus is entirely upon the lay worship of each household. The people are expected to bring freewill offerings, but the ascension, purification, and peace offerings that are central to the celebration in Leviticus are not mentioned at all. The focus of Numbers chapters 28-29 stands at the other extreme to that of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy chapter 16 emphasizes the lay worship of each household and their peace and freewill offerings. Leviticus chapter 23 brings together first fruit offerings, centralized peace offerings, and more general lay observance of the feast with the public sacrifices of the sanctuary. In the treatment of the Feast of Weeks in Numbers chapter 28, however, the focus is firmly fixed upon the public sacrifices performed by the priests on behalf of the entire nation at the central sanctuary.

We can see a similar thing in the case of the Passover for instance. When that is mentioned, no mention is made of the Passover lamb, which would have been absolutely central to the lay celebration of the festival. Comparing the instructions concerning the Feast of Weeks with those of Leviticus chapter 23, we might note that the wave offering of the first fruits, while mentioned as the context, is not treated, and no reference is made to the peace offerings that we find in Leviticus.

Closer examination also reveals variation in the specifics of the other sacrifices. While the ascension offerings of Leviticus are seven lambs, one bull, and two rams, the ascension offerings of Numbers are seven lambs, two bulls, and one ram. The numbers of bulls and rams have been switched.

While some might see this difference as proof of inconsistency in the sacrificial laws, we might also consider the possibility that such changes are intentional ways in which the developments in Israel's situation and stature, especially as it moves from the wilderness into the Promised Land, are registered in the sacrificial system. The sacrifices in Numbers chapters 28 and 29 are listed in order of their frequency, and then in order of their occurrence within the festal calendar. The daily sacrifices come first, then the Sabbath sacrifices, then those for the first of the month, then those for the various feasts, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and then for the Feast of Tabernacles.

The lamb was the most common sacrifice, one would be offered every single morning and every single evening, with an extra two being offered on the Sabbath. The feast days usually involved the sacrifice of seven lambs, with fourteen lambs being offered on each of the days of the Feast of Tabernacles. Scholars speculate about the reason for the placing of these chapters at this point in the Book of Numbers.

Daniel Olson suggests that we see these in some way as parallel to the chapters with which the Book of Numbers begin, which create a spatial order within the camp of Israel. These chapters are concerned with creating a temporal order, as Israel's year would be structured according to the regular patterns of offerings. He writes, Behind the sacrifices and appointed times of Numbers chapters 28 and 29 stands the story of God's creation of the world in Genesis chapter 1. The story of creation in Genesis is a story of God's dividing and ordering the cosmos into day and night, into a week of six days of profane work and a seventh day of holy Sabbath rest, and into an ongoing cycle of months and seasons within a year marked by the sun and the moon.

The pattern of the day established at the beginning of the story of the creation is upheld by the daily sacrifices in the morning and the evening. The pattern of the week is upheld by the Sabbath sacrifices that set it apart as a day from the other days of the week. The months, ordered according to the movements of the moon, are marked out by the extra sacrifices for the first of each month.

The various festivals of Israel's life would also be related to its agricultural calendar, corresponding to the natural seasonality of its life within the land. Olson writes, In the context of the Book of Numbers, the list in Numbers chapters 28 and 29 of sacrifices and offerings as the means of maintaining order in time is analogous to the structure of the Israelite camp in Numbers chapters 2 to 4 that sought to maintain order in space. The camp and its spatial structure, which was centred on God's presence in its midst, enabled Israel to move from Egypt through the chaos of the wilderness.

The new generation, poised on the doorstep of Canaan, is about to leave the wilderness. It is about to enter a land of fertility and agricultural seasons in the settled existence of rhythms and order. The structured order of time and appointed offerings will regularly remind the Israelites of their status as God's holy people, and will help sustain the order of the community's social and religious life against the forces of chaos that will continue to threaten it.

A question to consider, how can the calendrical structure of Israel's public worship help to inform Christian worship?