

CHAPTER 31

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS 31

This chapter contains an order to make war upon Midian, which was accordingly done, (⁻⁰⁶¹⁰¹Numbers 31:1-12), but Moses was wroth, because they saved the women alive, who, through the counsel of Balaam, had been the cause of sin, and of the plague for it in Israel, and therefore orders them, and the male children, to be slain, (⁻⁰⁶¹¹³Numbers 31:13-18), and then directs to the purification of the soldiers, their captives and spoil, (⁻⁰⁶¹¹⁹Numbers 31:19-24), and by the command of God an account is taken of the prey, and a division of it made between the soldiers and the congregation, and out of each part a tribute is levied for the Lord, (⁻⁰⁶¹²⁵Numbers 31:25-31) and the sum of the whole booty is given, (⁻⁰⁶¹³²Numbers 31:32-35) and of the part which belonged to the soldiers, and of the tribute given to the Lord, (⁻⁰⁶¹³⁶Numbers 31:36-41) and of the part which belonged to the children of Israel, (⁻⁰⁶¹⁴²Numbers 31:42-47) and besides the above tribute to the Lord, the officers made a voluntary oblation out of their spoil, both by way of gratitude for sparing their lives, and to make atonement for their souls, (⁻⁰⁶¹⁴⁸Numbers 31:48-54).

Ver. 1. *And the Lord spake unto Moses,* etc.] After the plague upon Israel for their fornication and idolatry, into which they were drawn by the daughters of Moab and Midian, and after the sum of the people was taken in the plains of Moab, and various laws given or repeated, and a little before the death of Moses:

saying; as follows.

Ver. 2. *Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites,* etc.] For the injury they had done them, by sending their daughters among them, who enticed them to commit uncleanness with them, and then drew them into the worship of their idols, which brought the wrath of God upon them, and for which 24,000 persons were slain. Now, though the Moabites had a concern in this affair as well as the Midianites, yet they were spared; which some think was for the sake of Lot, from whom they descended; but why not the Midianites for the sake of Abraham, whose offspring they were by

Keturah? Jarchi says, they were spared because of Ruth, who was to spring from them; and so she might, and yet vengeance be taken on great numbers of them: but the truer reason seems to be, either because the sin of the Moabites was not yet full, and they were reserved for a later punishment; or rather because they were not the principal actors in the above affair; but the Midianites, who seem to have advised Balak at first to send for Balaam to curse Israel, and who harboured that soothsayer after he had been dismissed by Balak, and to whom he gave his wicked counsel, and which they readily followed, and industriously pursued:

afterward shalt thou be gathered unto thy people; or die, (see ^{<0273>}Numbers 27:13), it being some satisfaction to him to see the good land, as he did from Abarim, and the Israelites avenged on their enemies before his death.

Ver. 3. *And Moses spake unto the people, saying*, etc.] In obedience to the divine command; this must be supposed to be spoken to the heads or princes of the tribes:

arm some of yourselves unto the war: not the whole body of the militia, 600,000 men and upwards, only some of them, and these choice and select men; and, according to the Jewish writers, good men, who, detesting the sins of lewdness and idolatry, would more strictly and severely avenge themselves on the Midianites for drawing their brethren into those sins, whereby they fell; and so Jarchi calls them righteous men:

[and] let them go against the Midianites, and avenge the Lord of Midian: what the Lord calls the vengeance of the Israelites, Moses calls the vengeance of the Lord, because they were the Lord's people, and his cause and theirs the same: and because the sins they were drawn into by the Midianites were not only against themselves, and to their prejudice, but against the Lord and to the dishonour of his name.

Ver. 4. *Of every tribe a thousand*, etc.] So that the whole number of those that were armed were 12,000 as after given:

throughout all the tribes of Israel; this is observed, as Jarchi thinks, to comprehend the tribe of Levi, which in some cases was left out of the account:

shall ye send to the war; to fight with Midian.

Ver. 5. *So they were delivered out of the thousands of Israel, etc.]*

Several thousands very probably offered themselves voluntarily to go to the war, or however were summoned together on this account, and out of them the following number was delivered of picked and chosen men:

a thousand [of every] tribe, twelve thousand armed for war; which was but a small number to go against so considerable a nation and people; but this was done to show that the war was of the Lord, he would fight the battle, and give them victory, it being the same to him to do it with few as with many; and to encourage the people of Israel to believe the Lord would give them success against their many and powerful enemies in the land of Canaan, on the borders of which they now were.

Ver. 6. *And Moses sent them to the war, etc.]* Being mustered and armed:

a thousand of [every] tribe, them and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest to the war; which looks as if Phinehas was the general of this army; for Moses went not to the war, and no mention is made of Joshua, nor might it be proper for him, he being the successor of Moses, who was quickly to die; but it seems rather that there was no one person that had the command of the whole, but every captain commanded his own company; since, when Moses met them, and was angry with them for sparing the women, he does not address anyone as the chief commander, but all the officers, (⁰⁶¹⁴Numbers 31:14), however, it was very proper and prudent to send Phinehas with them, both on account of his office as a priest, to encourage the people, and because of his extraordinary zeal against the Midianites for what they had done, as appears by his slaying a prince of Simeon and a Midianitish princess in their uncleanness:

[and he went] with the holy instruments, and the trumpets to blow in his hand; by “the holy instruments”, Aben Ezra understands the ark with what appertained to it, which in later times used to be carried out when the Israelites went to war, (⁰⁶⁰⁶Joshua 6:4 ^{0604B}1 Samuel 4:3,4), and Jarchi interprets them of the ark and plate of gold ^{f452} which was upon the forehead of the high priest; but what had Phinehas to do with this, who was but a common priest? though the Targum of Jonathan paraphrases it,

“with the Urim and Thummim of holiness, to inquire by them;”

and it appears, that sometimes a son of an high priest was intrusted with the ephod, to which the breastplate was fastened, which had the Urim and Thummim on it, and made use thereof to inquire by, as in the times of

David, (⁰²³⁶1 Samuel 23:6-12), but it is the opinion of some learned men, and they may be in the right, that these instruments are no other than the trumpets, and who suppose the “vau” is not copulative, but explanative, so Ben Gersom, and read the words thus, “with the holy instruments, even”, or, “that is, the trumpets”^{f453}, the silver trumpets ordered to be made, (⁰⁴⁰²Numbers 10:2) one of which was for the journey of the camps, and also to blow an alarm for war, and which was done by the priests; and so the Targum of Jonathan adds here,

“to cause the camp of Israel to rest, and to cause it to go;”

that is, to direct it when it should stop, and when it should move.

Ver. 7. *And they warred against the Midianites, as the Lord commanded Moses*, etc.] Whether the Midianites came out against them with an army, and there was a pitched battle between them, is not certain; however the Israelites committed acts of hostility upon them, by entering their cities, plundering their houses, and slaying the inhabitants of them; the Targum of Jonathan is,

“they warred against Midian, and surrounded it in the three corners of it, as the Lord commanded Moses;”

for, as Maimonides^{f454} observes from tradition,

“when they besiege a city to take it, they do not surround it in the four corners of it, but in the three corners of it, and leave a place to flee out, that everyone that would might escape for his life, as it is said, “and they warred against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses”; by report, or from tradition, it is learnt that so he commanded him;”

that is, in such a manner to besiege a city; but for this there is only tradition, for it is not mentioned among the rules after directed to in such a case, (⁰⁵¹⁰Deuteronomy 20:10-20),

and they slew all the males; which fell into their hands; for, no doubt, there were multitudes that made their escape, since in later times we read of the Midianites, as a very powerful people, and very distressing to Israel, (⁰⁷⁰¹Judges 6:1,2) these, as Aben Ezra observes, they slew, were such as were grown up, for as for their little ones, them they spared and carried captive, (⁰⁵¹⁰Numbers 31:9).

Ver. 8. *And they slew the kings of Midian, beside the rest of them that were slain*, etc.] Besides the males of the common people, they slew their kings, who were petty kings or princes, perhaps under the king of Moab, or had reassumed their titles and government after the death of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who, in his time, were called dukes of Sihon, (^{<0632>}Joshua 13:21), namely,

Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, five kings of Midian; the Targum of Jonathan says of Zur, this is Balak, which is not probable; it is more likely, what Aben Ezra observes, that he was the father of Cosbi, whom Phinehas slew, (^{<0655>}Numbers 25:15).

Balaam also, the son of Beor, they slew with the sword; so that he died not a natural death, but a violent one, not such an one as he desired, the death of the righteous, but of bloody and deceitful men, who do not live out half their days; for if the Jewish writers ^{f455} are to be credited, he was but thirty four years of age when he was slain, which is not quite half the age of man, that being seventy, (^{<0910>}Psalm 90:10), it appears by this that he was among the Midianites at the time of this war; either he stayed here till this time, when he went from Balak with an intention to go into his own country; or he had returned hither, being either sent for, by the princes of Midian, on this occasion; or, as some say, as Aben Ezra observes, that he came to Midian after he returned to his place, on hearing the plague that came upon Israel through his counsel, to receive the money of the elders of Midian for it; and so Chaskuni.

Ver. 9. *And the children of Israel took [all] the women of Midian captives*, etc.] The word “all” is not in the original text, nor should it be supplied; for if all had been taken, and carried captive, and put to death, as those were afterwards, how could there have been such an increase of the Midianites as there was in some time after this? (see ^{<0706>}Judges 6:1-6) but the meaning is, that as many as fell into their hands they took and carried captive:

and their little ones; both male and female:

and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks; their oxen and their sheep, and also their asses, as appears by the following account:

and all their goods: in their houses, their wealth and substance, gold, silver, etc.

Ver. 10. *And they burnt all their cities wherein they dwelt*, etc. } So far as they went into the country, which, perhaps, might not be the whole land of Midian:

and all their goodly castles with fire; which were either the palaces of their princes and nobles, or such like great personages; or they were fortified places, for the security of their cities and country: the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan interpret them of their houses of worship, their temples, and their altars.

Ver. 11. *And they took all the spoil*, etc.] In their cities and castles; and all the prey, both of men and of beasts; all sorts of cattle, oxen, sheep, and asses.

Ver. 12 *And they brought the captives, the prey, and the spoil*, etc.] The women and children, who were the captives, and the beasts which were the prey, and the gold, silver, etc. which were the spoil:

unto Moses and Eleazar the priest, and unto the congregation of the children of Israel; that is, they were bringing the above persons things unto them, returning from the war with Midian:

unto the camp at the plains of Moab, which are by Jordan [near] Jericho: (see ⁴⁰²¹Numbers 22:1), but they were stopped, and were not admitted into the camp until seven days after.

Ver. 13. *And Moses and Eleazar the priest, and all the princes of the congregation*, etc.] Attended, no doubt, with a proper retinue:

went forth to meet them without the camp; partly to do honour to them, and to congratulate them on their victory, and partly to hinder them going into the camp directly, until they were purified; (see ⁴⁰¹⁴⁷Genesis 14:17,18).

Ver. 14. *And Moses was wroth with the officers of the host*, etc.] The general officers who had the command of the army, for there does not appear to be anyone that was one general over the whole, otherwise the displeasure would have fallen upon him:

[with] the captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, which came from the battle; rather “with” should be left out, not being in the text; and these captains only explain who the officers were, and these were one hundred and thirty two, as Aben Ezra observes; twelve who were captains over thousands, and were more properly the general officers; and one

hundred and twenty over so many hundreds, into which the whole were subdivided.

Ver. 15. *And Moses said unto them, have ye saved all the women alive?*] Which either had been reported to him, or he concluded, by seeing so many with them; and this question is put, not for information, but by way of reproof, and as chiding them for what they had done; for they might have received orders from him to put them to death, when he sent them out; and if so, there was the more reason to be angry with them; or he might conclude they would have done this of themselves, knowing what instruments of mischief these women had been to Israel.

Ver. 16. *Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam,* etc.] Who advised the Midianites to send their women into the camp of Israel, and allure them to uncleanness, and so draw them into idolatry, which counsel they followed and it succeeded; for, by this means, they were brought

to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor; by worshipping Baalpeor, the god of the Moabites and Midianites; whereby they transgressed the commandment of God, which forbid them having and worshipping any other gods besides him, and is a sin highly offensive to him, being greatly derogatory to his honour and glory:

and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord; for that sin; and in that plague died 24,000 persons, (^{<0259>}Numbers 25:9).

Ver. 17. *Now therefore kill every male among the little ones,* etc.] Which they had taken and brought captives, (^{<0319>}Numbers 31:9)

and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him; who might be such, at least many of them, who had lain with Israelitish men; and as the adulterers had been put to death, so now the adulteresses; or they were ordered to, be slain, even all of them, lest they should entice the children of Israel to uncleanness, and so to idolatry again: now these were known to be such, either by conjecture at their age, or rather, through the examination of matrons, unless it can be thought, as it is by some, that it was by divine revelation.

Ver. 18. *But all the women children,* etc.] The females among the little ones:

that have not known a man by lying with him; which might be pretty clear, and easily concluded, from their age:

keep for yourselves; either to be handmaids to them, or to be married among them when grown up, and become proselytes, and initiated into their religion.

Ver. 19. *And do ye abide without the camp seven days.* etc.] Which was the time that anyone that touched a dead body remained unclean, (^{<0491>}Numbers 19:11),

whosoever hath killed any person; as most of them if not all must have done; all the males of Midian that fell into their hands being slain by them, that were men grown:

and whosoever hath touched any slain; as they must to strip them of their garments, and take their spoil from them:

purify both yourselves and your captives, on the third and on the seventh day; which were the days appointed for the purification of such that were polluted by touching dead bodies, (^{<0491>}Numbers 19:11) and their captives, which were the female little ones; (for as for the women, and males among the little ones, they were ordered to be slain;) though they were Heathens, yet inasmuch as they were to be for the service of the Israelites, and to be brought up in their religion, they were to be purified also; to which purpose is the note of Jarchi;

“not that the Gentiles receive uncleanness and need sprinkling, but as ye are the children of the covenant, so your captives, when they come into the covenant, and are defiled, need sprinkling.”

Ver. 20. *And purify all your raiment,* etc.] By washing them; and this may intend not so much their own wearing apparel, as the raiment they took off of the dead bodies of the Midianites, since the person that touched a dead body was not obliged to wash his clothes, but the clean person that sprinkled the water of purification on him, (^{<0491>}Numbers 19:19,21), some render the words, “purify yourselves”^{f456}, “together with the raiment”, etc. which seems to be the best version of them:

and all that is made of skins; of any sort of creatures, as the covering of tents, shoes, bottles, etc. (see ^{<0492>}Leviticus 11:32)

and all work of goats' hair; such as the covering of tents was also made of: and this, according to Jarchi and other Jewish writers ^{f457} includes vessels made of the horns, hoofs, and bones of these creatures: and all things made of wood; as beds, cups, dishes, etc. all which might be purified by washing; (see ^{<B52>}Leviticus 15:12).

Ver. 21. *And Eleazar the priest said unto the men of war, which went to the battle*, etc.] To all the soldiers, officers, and common men:

this is the ordinance of the law, which the Lord commanded Moses; concerning the purification of unclean persons and things, hereby confirming what Moses had said.

Ver. 22. *Only the gold, and the silver, the brass, the iron, the tin, and the lead.*] These are excepted, and, though unclean, are not to be purified by washing, but in another way, by fire, as follows; all these metals were well known in those early times, and were made use of for instruments and vessels of various sorts.

Ver. 23. *Every thing that may abide the fire, ye shall make it go through the fire*, etc.] Either through the smoke of the fire, and so be purified by suffumigation; or be put into the fire itself, where though they might be melted as the above things, yet not consumed as raiment, and vessels of skins, goats' hair, and wood, would be:

and it shall be clean; accounted so:

nevertheless, it shall be purified with the water of separation; with the water mixed with the ashes of the red heifer burnt, and sprinkled on it; (see ^{<B99>}Numbers 19:9)

and all that abideth not the fire; without being consumed, as whatsoever is of wood, etc.

ye shall make go through the water; dip them in it, and rinse them there with a quantity sufficient; which the Targum of Jonathan says is forty seahs of water.

Ver. 24. *And ye shall wash your clothes on the seventh day*, etc.] As the leper did, (^{<B49>}Leviticus 14:9):

and ye shall be clean, and afterward ye shall come into the camp; into the camp of Israel, into the camp of the Levites, and into the camp of God, the tabernacle.

Ver. 25. *And the Lord spake unto Moses*, etc.] After the purification of the soldiers, their captives, and spoil:

saying; as follows.

Ver. 26. *Take the sum of the prey that was taken, both of man and beast*, etc.] The number of the females that were taken captive and spared, and of the cattle, the sheep, oxen, and asses:

thou, and Eleazar the priest, and the chief fathers of the congregation; who were all men of authority and character, and fit to be employed in such service, and of whose capacity and fidelity there could be no doubt.

Ver. 27. *And divide the prey into two parts*, etc.] Into two equal parts, both the number of the people and of the cattle, when taken:

between them that took the war upon them, and went out to battle; the soldiers; and by this it appears that they went voluntarily and cheerfully:

and between all the congregation; so that the part of them that went to battle, and of those that stayed in the camp, were alike, and which in process of time became a statute and ordinance, (~~ORIG~~ 1 Samuel 30:24,25 ~~ORIG~~ Psalm 68:12).

Ver. 28. *And levy a tribute unto the Lord of the men of war, which went out to battle*, etc.] That is, out of the part of the prey which was divided to them:

one soul of five hundred, both “of the persons”; or one woman of five hundred, as the Targum of Jonathan:

and of the beeves, and of the asses, and of the sheep; that is, one out of five hundred, of each of them also.

Ver. 29. *And take it of their half*, etc.] Of the half part of the prey divided to the soldiers:

and give it unto Eleazar the priest for an heave offering of the Lord; by way of thanksgiving for the success and victory, God had given them, by means of which so much booty had fallen into their hands.

Ver. 30. *And of the children of Israel's half, thou shalt take one portion of fifty,* etc.] Which was abundantly more than what was taken out of the part of the soldiers; and the reason of it is plain and easy to be discerned; the soldiers had taken much pains, and gone through much fatigue, as well as had hazarded their lives, and therefore less was to be taken from them; and besides the tribute levied out of their half was to be given to the priests, who were not so numerous as the Levites, among whom the part out of the half of the congregation was to be distributed:

of the persons; of the women, as the Targums of Jonathan, one of fifty out of them was to be given to the Levites to be their handmaids, or to be taken in marriage by them, or their sons, when fit for it:

of the beeves, of the asses, and of the sheep, of all manner of beasts; of oxen, asses, sheep, and goats, one out of fifty of each of these sorts were to be taken. Aben Ezra observes, no mention is made of camels, being but few, and no part taken:

and give them unto the Levites, which keep the charge of the tabernacle of the Lord; for these being employed in the service of the tabernacle, came in for their share of the tribute levied unto the Lord.

Ver. 31. *And Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the Lord commanded Moses.*] Took an account of the booty, divided it equally between the soldiers and the congregation of Israel, and levied a part out of each as a tribute for the Lord, which was given to the priests and Levites.

Ver. 32-47. *And the booty, being the rest of the prey which the men of war had caught,* etc.] The remainder of it, besides what they had eaten in their return from the war, and during their seven days' stay without the camp: from hence to the end of (⁰⁶⁴⁷Numbers 31:47) is only an account of the prey or booty taken, which in general were 675,000 sheep, 72,000 beeves or oxen, 61,000 asses, and 32,000 females who had never known man; the half out of these, which fell to the share of the soldiers, were 337,500 sheep, 36,000 beeves or oxen, 30,500 asses, and 16,000 females, out of which were given as an heave offering to the Lord six hundred and seventy five sheep, seventy two beeves or oxen, sixty one asses, and thirty two women: the half divided unto the children of Israel consisted of 337,500 sheep, 36,000 beeves or oxen, 30,500 asses, and 16,000 women, out of which one in fifty, both of women and cattle, were given to the Levites; what that amounted to is not expressed, but may be easily reckoned.

Ver. 48. *And the officers which were over thousands of the host,* etc.] Over the twelve thousand, of which the host or army consisted: namely, the captains of thousands, and the captains of hundreds, came near unto Moses; of their own accord, without being sent, or required to do what they did.

Ver. 49. *And they said unto Moses,* etc.] Gave the following relation to him, which is a very surprising one:

thy servants have taken the sum of the men of war which are under our charge; since the war with Midian was over, they had mustered the several companies under their command, such as had thousands, and those that had hundreds:

and there lacketh not one man of us; which is a most amazing and unheard of thing, that in waging war with a whole nation, slaying all their males, sacking and burning so many cities, plundering the inhabitants of their substance, taking and carrying off such a vast number of captives, yet not one should fall by the sword of the enemy, or by any disease or accident whatever, but all to a man should return to the camp of Israel again; this is not to be paralleled in any history.

Ver. 50. *We have therefore brought an oblation to the Lord,* etc.] A freewill offering, out of the spoil, over and above the tribute levied out of the half that came unto them;

what every man hath gotten: or “found”^{f458}, in the houses, and upon the bodies of the slain, or of such that were taken captives:

of jewels of gold either such as were set in gold; or rather, as the words may be rendered,

vessels of gold^{f459}, as dishes, cups, spoons, and the like:

chains; which were wore about the neck, or upon the arm, as Aben Ezra:

and bracelets; for the hand, as the same writer, (see ^{<0120>}Genesis 24:22,30),

rings; for the finger:

ear rings; for the ear, as we render it, the word signifies something round:

and tablets; which, according to the Targum of Jonathan, were ornaments that hung down between the breasts:

to make an atonement for our souls before the Lord; not only this offering was brought as a token of gratitude and thankfulness, for sparing of everyone of their lives, and giving them such success and victory, and so large a spoil of the enemy; but also to expiate any sins they had been guilty of in going out, and coming in, and particularly for sparing the women they should have put to death, for which Moses was wroth with them, (^{QEBH}Numbers 31:14).

Ver. 51. *And Moses and Eleazar the priest took the gold of them*, etc.] For it seems the several things before mentioned were all of gold:

even all wrought jewels; or “vessels of work” ^{f460} or wrought vessels, or instruments, “chains, bracelets”, etc. which were all of gold, and curiously wrought.

Ver. 52. *And all the gold of the offering that they offered up to the Lord*, etc.] The whole amount, weight, and value of it put together:

even of the captains of thousands, and the captains of hundreds, and perhaps of every common soldier, who might contribute his part, though it is not mentioned, but included in the oblation of the officers:

was 16,750 shekels; which, according to the calculation of a very learned man ^{f461}, were 7,780 ounces, four drachms, two scruples, and thirty five grains.

Ver. 53. *For the men of war had taken spoil, every man for himself*.] And which he kept for himself, and did not deliver in with the prey or booty, which was brought to Moses and Eleazar, the sum of which was taken by them; and this seems to confirm what has been hinted, that, as each soldier had taken spoil for himself, so everyone contributed his quota towards this freewill offering to the Lord.

Ver. 54. *And Moses and Eleazar the priest took the gold of the captains of thousands and of hundreds*, etc.] Which they so freely and generously offered:

and brought it into the tabernacle of the congregation; and laid it up in some chamber there:

for a memorial for the children of Israel before the Lord: in remembrance of the signal victory these men obtained, and of the singular care of divine Providence in protecting them, that not one was lost in the expedition; and

of their sense of gratitude and thankfulness for the favours granted them, and to put the children of Israel in mind for their imitation, when favoured with mercies from the Lord.