

Numbers Chapters 26-27, 36

The Second Census and the Petition of the Daughters of Zelophehad

Chapters 22-31: Israel in the Plains of Moab. These chapters tell of Israel's lengthy encampment in the plains of Moab at the northern end of the Dead Sea. Here they prepared to cross the Jordan and enter Canaan proper. The events here match to some extent those at the other long encampments at Sinai and Kadesh: there is law-giving (chs. 28–36), a major apostasy (ch. 25), a census (ch. 26), and a battle (ch. 31). But these familiar features are preceded and followed by a very positive affirmation of the promise of the land. The prophecies of Balaam reaffirm Israel's destiny in a surprising and emphatic way (chs. 23–24), whereas the last word of God through Moses in 36:9 is: "for each of the tribes ... of Israel shall hold on to its own inheritance." In this way the promise made to Abraham that the land of Canaan would be Israel's everlasting possession (Gen. 17:8) is reaffirmed. This theme will be strongly emphasized in the book of Deuteronomy. – ESVBible.org

Read Numbers 1:1-3, 44-46

This was the first census, taken in the desert of Sinai.

Read Numbers 26:1-11, 51, 63-65

This is the second census, taken in the fields of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho. This is after the 40 years of wandering permitted the first generation to die out, and therefore these are entirely new people, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. Do you remember why?

Notice that the total number has changed little, although the totals of the various tribes has, in some cases, increased or decreased dramatically. For the sake of comparison, currently, the total US troop deployment overseas is 369,000, not all of whom are in combat zones. As of December 31, 2010, there are 45,600 personnel in Iraq, 103,700 in Afghanistan, and 8,500 in Libya. The entire population of Alaska is about 700,000. Staten Island has 468,300 residents.

Read Numbers 26:52-56

The later chapters of Numbers are all concerned with Israel's future life in Canaan. God (most recently through Balaam) has predicted a secure and prosperous future there. This census deals with establishing the relative size of the tribes so that they may each be given an appropriately sized holding.

Read Numbers 27:1-4

What problem do the daughters of Zelophehad (zee LO fuh had) bring to the elders? The census just taken did not count women, but only fighting men. Because their father had no sons, his clan was not counted in the census, and would receive no property in the division of Canaan. Consider the boldness of these women, in that time when women were treated as little more than property. Under traditional rules, women did not inherit land, but were given in marriage with a dowry. On what do they base their claim (vs 4)?

Numbers 27:5-11

God honors the women's request. In fact, God declares that they are "right," and establishes a new rule of inheritance based on their circumstance.

Notice, God did not provide for the daughters of Zelophehad to inherit until they asked. What if they had not asked? What can we learn from them in our petitions to the Lord? Read Hebrews 11:6; Matthew 7:9; James 1:5

What can we learn from them about resolving conflicts? Read James 4:2

Read Numbers 36:1-13

What problem is created by inheritance by daughters? The Jubilee Year occurred every 50 years, and in it, land which had been sold returned to its original owner (Lev. 25:10–28). But this did not apply to land that was transferred through marriage. Normally when men married, there was no transfer of land; it stayed within the man's own tribe. But if a land-owning daughter married, the land would be transferred to her husband's family and tribe.

What instruction does Moses give to prevent this transfer? What freedom do the daughters of Zelophehad sacrifice? What does this say about the reason for their petition for land?

Once again, notice that God declares the concern of the people "right" (vs 5). Clearly, God is concerned with maintaining the division of the land among the tribes in accordance with the Numbers 26 census. Can you think why? Read Genesis 17:8.

What does the people's concern for the proper division of land demonstrate in them?