

Parashat Ma'asei
(Parasha #125 3-year Cycle)
Torah: Numbers 35:9–36:13
Haftara: Joshua 20:1–6

The Land of Promise

Introduction

The entire book of Numbers is about Israel's journey from Kadesh Barnea in the northern Sinai to the Promised Land. Along the way, Moshe provides necessary instructions to teach them how to live in the Promised Land. This is especially true for the final 4 chapters of Numbers. We wouldvould like to couple these three chapters together and share some thoughts about the Land of Israel which they contain.

The reason why we are emphasizing this them is because many believers in Yeshua — both Jewish and non-Jewish see very little importance to studying about the Land. These chapters contain very important concepts about the Land which are essential for all believers to consider. Hence, we will approach today's study with the following outline:

- I. Chapter 33 — God's Command to Remember
- II. Chapter 34 — God Describing the Borders of the Land
- III. Chapter 35 — God's Dwelling in the Land
- IV. Chapter 36 — God's People Devoted to the Land

I. CHAPTER 33 — GOD'S COMMAND TO REMEMBER

We will not comment on most of the content of chapter 33. Presumably that has already been done in previous studies. However, **33:2** contains an important statement about the Land and Israel's journey to it.

A. The Problem of Details

Chapter 33 contains an itinerary of 42 stopping points during Israel's wilderness wanderings. This can pose a problem for people who like to draw practical application from all the parts of Scripture. How can this be done in such a seemingly dry historical and geographical summary?

B. "By the Command of God" 33:2

Numbers **33:2** says, "Moses recorded their starting places according to their journeys by the command of the Lord, and these are their journeys according to their starting places. From this we can see that, rather than considering this material that we can just pass over quickly, God Himself commands us to remember each and every place. God himself commanded the *recording* of the itinerary. Why would He have done so? We can think of a few reasons (with the help of some good commentators!)

1. *To show God's compassion even in the midst of anger.*

It is true that much of the 40 years Israel needed to be disciplined for various reasons. Yet, when it was over, we still see that Israel survived! There was a remnant that was posed ready to take the Land. That is a clear demonstration of God's compassion.

2. *To remind them of God's miraculous provisions.*

Along the way, the text mentions various places where we are reminded that Israel experienced miraculous provisions from God/ Despite His discipline, God's people nevertheless experienced His grace and miraculous provisions.

3. To show that it was all orchestrated by the Lord: they did not lose their way!

Liberal and other so-called scholars say that Israel was simply lost and that is why they wandered the wilderness for 40 years. By seeing that God commanded Moshe to record these stops along the way we catch a glimpse that rather than being lost, God orchestrated each and every step along the way for Israel to go.

4. To show the strength of the remnant of faith who followed God despite the difficulties.

The remnant made it through. They survived at each location of distress. God wants them to look back and remember these places to encourage them in their faith that it matters to trust Him.

II. CHAPTER 34 — GOD DESCRIBING THE BORDERS OF THE LAND

A. The Designation of Borders is Real

This information speaks against allegorism, which is practiced by many commentators.. We cannot symbolize these things. The Land is very real with tangible boundaries, and we are to interpret it as such.

B. Prepares Us for Deuteronomy 32:8–9

“When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance,
When He separated the sons of man,
He set the boundaries of the peoples,
According to the number of the sons of Israel.
For the Lord’s portion is His people.
Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance.

III. CHAPTER 35 — GOD’S DWELLING IN THE LAND

Numbers 35:34 says, “You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel.” This comes at the end of a whole chapter speaking about cities of refuge. The verse provides the reason for such specific teaching about these cities. Let us go through the chapter and see how it leads to this conclusion.

A. The Basic Concept of the Cities of Refuge. 35:6-8

The basics about the cities of refuge are as follows:

1. The cities that were later selected as the asylum cities are Bezer, Ramoth-Gilead, and Golan in Transjordan, and Hebron, Shechem, and Kedesh in cis-Jordan
 - a. Deuteronomy 4:43; Joshua 20:7–8; 21:13, 21, 27, 32, 36, 38). (**Show Map**)
 - b. There seems to be no significance to the *number* of the cities (six), but there is certainly a significance to the *placement* of them.
2. The cities of refuge thus had a **twofold purpose**: to protect un-convicted manslaughterers from the avenger of blood and to serve as places of banishment for convicted manslaughterers.
3. **Not Just Anyone! 35:12**

The city of refuge is not to be understood as a place where anyone may go for refuge for any crime, nor can it be assumed that the one who fled there is exempt from justice. Instead, only manslayers could flee to one. There they were to await trial and not escape the law.
4. **Contrast with Other Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) Practices**
 - a. ANE: No distinction between accidental and deliberate homicide.
 - b. ANE: Any relative could pay for the death. Torah says only the murderer can.
 - c. ANE: Money could be paid to redeem the murderer. Torah says that no money can be paid.

- d. Torah says avenger of blood can only be a family member, not the community.

B. Unique Features of the Cities of Refuge

1. *The Avenger of Blood* (*go'el haDam*, גואל הדם) 35:19, 21

- a. He is not condemned but regulated.
b. The avenger of blood is a relative of the slain who will take it on himself to protect the family rights, to avenge his relatives of the loss suffered by the family.

We really need to grasp the reality of the blood avenger in the Near East — both ancient and modern. It was (and still is in some places) a legal right for the next of kin (the “redeemer”, 35:12) to take matters into his own hands and avenge the death of his relative.

- c. In fact, the term *go'el* often translated “redeemer,” has this basic idea; the *go'el* is principally the “protector of family rights” (see Leviticus 25:48; Ruth 3:13).
d. A redeemer is one who redeems the loss sustained by the family. This can be by payment of a price; it may also be in taking of life. In the latter case, one is an “avenger of blood” (*go'el haDam* 35:19, 21). In his rage against the loss of a family member, the *go'el haDam* might rashly kill the offender before he found out the circumstances of the death.

2. *Provision for The Ger* 35:16

- a. **35:15** explains that there will be equal access to these cities by all persons who are in the land, free citizen as well as sojourner or even temporary alien. This provision is another aspect of the grace of God who provides one law for all persons who come under the purview of the Torah of his grace.
b. Francis Schaeffer remarks, “Here was real justice — a universal and civil code that pertained equally to the citizen and the stranger. This justice was not rooted in the nation of a superior people but in the character of God; therefore, it pertained to all men.”¹

3. *Administering Proper Justice* 35:22–32

- a. It is an issue for the community.
• This provides the basis for what we do today with a trial by a jury. **35:24–25**
b. Justice is on the basis of at least 2 witnesses. **35:30**
c. No ransom may be used. **35:31**
d. Accused must remain within the city of refuge. **35:26–28**

4. *Examples of Murder as Opposed to Manslaughter* 35:16–21

“Real homicide involved a prepared instrument, a clear intent, and a clear motive. Such murderers had no place of refuge.”²

Strike with an Iron object = Murder **35:16**

Strike with a Hand-held Stone = Murder **35:17**

Strike with a Hand-held Wooden Object = Murder **35:18**

Purposely Pushing or throwing something at him = Murder **35:20**

Purposely Striking him with a Hostile Disposition = Murder **35:21**

Provision for accidental killing = Manslaughter **35:22–28**

¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History*, 171.

² *Ibid.*

5. *The Role of the High Priest* 35:25

- a. We must avoid dogmatism: This is an unclear matter.
- b. Various Thoughts
 - 1) *J. H. Hertz*, on the other hand says that since the cities of refuge were mentioned in connection with the Levitical cities, the death of the High Priest rather than the death of the king was a natural point to terminate the exile of the innocent manslayer.³
 - 2) *Jacob Milgrom (JPS)* suggests that
As the high priest atones for Israel's sins through the [ritual] service in his lifetime, so he atones for homicide through his death. Since the blood of the slain, although spilled accidentally, cannot be avenged through the death of the slayer, it is ransomed through the death of the high priest.⁴
 - 3) *Gordon J. Wenham* agrees with Milgrom and offers this remark: "Thus the high priest of ancient Israel anticipated the ministry of our Lord, not only in his life of offering sacrifice and prayer on behalf of the people, but also in his death."⁵
 - 4) *Philip J. Budd* explains that "There must be an appropriate death expiate killing. Human death can only be expiated by human death, the high priest is able to meet this requirement." Ronald Allen explains further when he writes, "His death as High Priest is the antitype for the atoning deaths of high priests of Israel in antiquity." His death was like "an arrow pointing forward to the death of the one who really mattered for salvation of the community—can we understand this provision."⁶

C. The Deeper Issues

1. *Protecting the Land* 35:33–34

- "So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it."
- a. To Pollute: "Defile or ruin"
 - b. God wants His land to not be defiled and spilling innocent blood defiles it.
 - c. It is paradoxical that in the right place blood is the most effective purifier, the only means of atonement between God and man, but in the wrong context it has precisely the opposite effect: *for blood pollutes the land...* Blood guilt is singled out for special attention because the pollution it causes is the most serious. "It is Numbers and Deuteronomy which focus most clearly on the effect on the land if homicide is not atoned for."⁷
 - d. The underlying theology of this text is most significant: the shedding of man's blood pollutes the land. The crime of murder is not only an offense against the sanctity of life; it is in fact a pollutant to the Lord's sacred land. It is like the blood of innocent Abel screaming out to the Lord (Genesis 4:10).

2. *Protecting God's Presence in the Land* 35:34

"Canaan is more than the promised land: it is the holy land sanctified by the presence of God living among his people (cf. Leviticus. 26:11–12). It is therefore of the utmost importance to keep this land pure especially from the most potent pollution of shed blood."⁸

³ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 722.

⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers (JPS Torah Commentary)*, 294.

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers (Tyndale Commentaries)*, 266.

⁶ Philip J. Budd, *Numbers (Word Biblical Commentary)*, 385.

⁷ Wenham, *op. cit.*, 263.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 262.

3. Man Is Made in God's Image

- a. James Boice writes, "Instead of treating life lightly, as the practical outworking of much of our law seems to do, the appointment of *the cities of refuge emphasized the value of man-made in God's image*. In other words, the institution of these cities was motivated by the same concern that required death for a murderer."⁹
- b. Francis Schaeffer adds, "Because God exists and because he has a character, we live in a true moral universe. Murder breaks the law of the universe. This means that the murderer has true moral guilt before God—something our modern generation knows nothing or little about—and this guilt must be taken seriously."¹⁰

Again, Schaeffer says, "Man is a significant creature. He is not part of the machinery. And this has many implications. One which society must understand is that murder is not trivial but extremely serious. It is not merely a breach of social custom or mores, or even that which upsets society. The Bible's great outcry against the murderer is, 'You have slain an image bearer of God'." When a person deliberately murders an image-bearer of God, he has done a serious thing indeed."¹¹

4. God: Mixture of Justice and Mercy

- a. The existence of the Cities of Refuge teaches us that sins do matter; they do affect one's life — but they may be forgiven, and a person may be set free. That is a clear expression of God's mercy.
- b. A further provision of mercy in these cases was the necessity for witnesses (35:30). This provision was made to avoid the possibility of an innocent party being accused and sentenced to death on insufficient evidence.
- c. The stipulations concerning ransom payments also are designed as acts of mercy (35:31–32). Conceivably, a wealthy person might take the route of paying ransom as a means of getting out of a sticky situation, while the poor person who could not afford a ransom payment would be at the mercy of the avenger or be forced to live years in an asylum city. Hence, no ransom was to be paid by either the deliberate killer or the manslayer.

IV. CHAPTER 36 — GOD'S PEOPLE DEVOTED TO THE LAND

"The last group of six laws in Numbers 33:50-36:13 has been concerned with the land, its distribution, its extent and its holiness. Indeed, the whole story of Numbers has been one of movement towards the land of promise. The last judgment Moses gave concerns the land and asserts: *every one of the Israelites shall cleave to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers* (36:7)."¹² Therefore, in this final chapter we see:

A. An Example of a Believing Remnant

The book of Numbers concludes with the touching sequel to the story of the daughters of Zelophechad. The children of Israel lived in the wilderness for forty years because their national leaders, for the most part, rejected the gift of the Promised Land. Numbers relates this story and discusses the events of those forty years.

Now, at the end of the journey, when Israel is about to enter the Land, we have the account of a few single women whose sole desire was that they would receive an inheritance for themselves and their family in the Land. From this we see that not everyone in Israel wanted to reject the Land. God always had His righteous remnant who were

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua (Boice Expositional Commentary)*, 109.

¹⁰ Schaeffer, *op. cit.*, 173.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wenham, *op. cit.*, 267.

faithful to Him. Although the rebellious generation died out, these women stand as a lasting testimony that indeed, there were godly people among the ancient Israelites, especially among the women.

B. A Sequel to Numbers 27

Significantly, in a book so marred by disobedience, there is a final statement of obedience; and it is in the lives of these noble daughters of Zelophehad. We may observe that we would likely never have heard of him had he had sons instead of these daughters!”¹³

C. The Tribes Count!

This sequel is concerned with tribal land. Moshe wanted to make sure that the daughters who inherit land do not marry outside of their tribe. So what? How does that matter? It matters for at least two reasons.

1. God designated each tribe their own territory and separateness. If they lost track of their tribe, the danger would be that god’s Word would become null and void. The tribal land contributes to tribal survival. There was risk that if they married outside of their ancestral tribe the tribal boundary lines would have to be redrawn, and that some tribes would suffer serious loss of land.¹⁴ Furthermore, “The integrity of the tribes as distinct entities within the people of God must be preserved.”¹⁵ See **Numbers 36:7**
2. The tribes of Levi and Judah had to remain intact. That would be easier if the other tribes remained intact.

D. What about the Lost Tribes?

1. **Definition:** The Ten Lost Tribes were the ten of the 12 Tribes of Israel that were said to have been exiled from the northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722/721 BCE. The Scriptural basis for the idea of lost tribes is 2 Kings 17:6 "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away unto Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and in Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes."
2. **Evidence for No Lost Tribes**
 - a. We know to where they were taken: 2 Kings 17:6 | in “Halah, and in Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.”
 - b. According to other records, the Transjordan and the Galilee did witness large-scale deportations, and entire tribes were lost. Historians have generally concluded that the deported tribes assimilated into the local population.
 - c. According to **2 Chronicles 15:9** members of the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon fled to Judah during the reign of Asa, king of Judah (c. 911–870 BCE).
 - d. Furthermore, **2 Chronicles 30:1–11** explicitly mentions northern Israelites who had been spared by the Assyrians—in particular, members of Dan, Ephraim, Manasseh, Asher, and Zebulun—and how members of the latter three returned to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem at that time.
 - e. Josephus (37–100 CE) wrote that "there are but two tribes in Asia and Europe subject to the Romans, while the ten tribes are beyond Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers. (Josephus, Flavius. *Antiquities*. p. 11:133).
 - f. The story of Anna in Luke 2:36 indicates that she is from the tribe of Asher, one of the so-called “lost tribes.”

¹³ Allen, *op. cit.*, Comments on Chapter 36.

¹⁴ Budd, *op. cit.*, 390.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

“The Book of Numbers, which so often presents the rebellion of God’s people against his grace and in defiance of his will, ends here on a happy note. These noble women, who were concerned for their father’s name and their own place in the land, listened to the Lord. There is a nice tie with this concluding section of the Book of Numbers to the epilogue of the Book of Proverbs. In the acrostic to the wise women (Proverbs 31:10–31), there is an exemplification of wisdom in action — in the life of a woman. Significantly, in a book so marred by disobedience, there is a final statement of obedience; and it is in the lives of these noble daughters of Zelophehad. We may observe that we would likely never have heard of him had he had sons instead of these daughters!”¹⁶

¹⁶ Allen, *op. cit.*, Comments of Chapter 36.