



Numbers - Chapter Twenty Seven

V Numbers 22:1-36:13 - Israel in the Plains of Moab (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Seven

One of those who died in the wilderness left behind five daughters but no son. Under the current legislation he would have no one to leave an inheritance to. Moses took the issue before the Lord who made an ordinance to deal with this and similar situations.

The second part of the chapter deals with preparations for the succession of leadership from Moses to Joshua, as it would soon be time for Moses to die.

V.d Numbers 27:1-30:16 - Laws for the Land

Chapters 27-30 are united by these laws for the land, particularly the inheritance rules and the celebrations of the festivals.

V.d.i Numbers 27:1-11 - The Daughters of Zelophehad

These daughters have already been mentioned in Numbers 26:33 without an obvious reason. Now it becomes clear why they were selected. Their father had no sons to inherit his land. Under traditional rules, daughters did not inherit from their father. The father would provide a dowry for them when they were married, but his land and other possessions were divided among his sons. If he had no sons, his estate would pass to his nearest male relative. Verses 9-10 spell out the order of precedence. However, the daughters point out that in this situation the land could pass out of Zelophehad's family and his name could be forgotten. To prevent this from happening, the daughters ask that they be allowed to inherit. So a new rule is devised for the case of a man without sons, whereby his daughters will inherit before his brothers or uncles (v.8).

¹ Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. ² They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, ³ ‘Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. ⁴ Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.’

Numbers 27:1-4

Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Normally, the land inheritance should be passed from a father to his sons in Israel, not to the daughters. What then should happen in the case of Zelophehad’s daughters, whose father had no sons? Will their father’s inheritance simply be assumed by someone else, or will his name live on through his inheritance? In general, the system was not completely unfair to women. A woman received a dowry from her father as a wedding present. Typically, the father required his potential son-in-law to provide much if not all of the dowry. A dowry might consist of clothes, jewellery, money, furniture or more, and it was thought that the dowry could help provide for the woman if her husband left her or unexpectedly died.

Noah here, Hebrew No’ah, is a woman’s name and spelled differently from Noah, Hebrew Noahk, in Genesis Chapters 6-9.

He was not among the company of Korah. It is not clear why Zelophehad’s daughters mention this episode. Perhaps those involved in Korah’s rebellion lost their right to inherit, or perhaps these daughters just wanted to make clear that their father had not been among those notorious sinners. Nor is it clear why they raised the issue of their inheritance at this stage. Perhaps the census had led them to think about inheritance, as it was designed to assess the size of the tribes with a view to giving them sufficient land. Maybe the Manassites were already thinking of settling in northern Transjordan after defeating Og, king of Bashan, there (Numbers 21:31-35 and 32:33-42). Or it may have been that the people were becoming aware that Moses would not be there to lead them into the Promised Land and they did not yet know how laws were then to be decreed. In any case, this request shows the faith of these women: they were sure that the land would be conquered and assigned.

⁵ Moses brought their case before the Lord. ⁶ And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ⁷ The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. ⁸ You shall also say to the Israelites, 'If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. ⁹ If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. ¹⁰ If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. ¹¹ And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses.'

Numbers 27:5-11

Moses brought their case before the Lord. Moses did what he should when faced with a new situation: he sought the guidance of God.

The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying. God seemed pleased that the daughters of Zelophehad brought this issue before Moses. God declared that if a father had no sons, the inheritance then could go to any daughters that survived him. In the case of Job, he left an inheritance to both his sons and daughters: <<*Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers*>> (Job 42:15).

If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. However, if there were no daughters, the inheritance then went to the father's brothers. If there were no brothers, the inheritance went to the next of kin.

It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance. The remarkable thing about these laws is that they were all made in anticipation, in faith, of coming into the inheritance of land in the Canaan. This was a real issue at this time, but the daughters of Zelophehad shows they were real women of faith, concerned about dividing up what they did not yet have in their hands, but knew they would possess by faith in a time yet to come.

V.d.ii Numbers 27:12-23 - Joshua Appointed Moses' Successor

The sin of Moses and Aaron at Meribah meant they could not enter the land, so a successor to Moses had to be appointed (Numbers 20:10-13). The Lord designates Moses' assistant Joshua as his successor (v.18). Then Joshua stands before Eleazar the high priest and Moses lays his hands on him, publicly declaring Joshua to be his successor (vv.22-23).

¹² The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go up this mountain of the Abarim range, and see the land that I have given to the Israelites. ¹³ When you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, ¹⁴ because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarrelled with me. You did not show my holiness before their eyes at the waters.’ (These are the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.)

Numbers 27:12-14

You also shall be gathered to your people. Like Aaron in Numbers 20:22-29, Moses must climb a mountain to die. From it he will see the Promised Land. It was still many months until Moses would climb to the top of the mountain, able to see the Promised Land but not able enter it; he would die there on the mountain (Deuteronomy Chapter 34). Yet God told him of it here, so as to prepare his heart for the right time and to highlight the reason for the succession to Joshua.

¹⁵ Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, ¹⁶ ‘Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation ¹⁷ who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd.’

Numbers 27:15-17

Let the Lord, appoint someone over the congregation. After hearing of his coming fate, Moses does not try to talk God out of it, or complain about his situation; his only concern seems to be for the congregation, for the people, not for himself. This is the mark of a true leader.

So that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd are in constant danger; they struggle to find provisions of food and water, and they are never led to where they should be: <<*Then Micaiah said, ‘I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep without a shepherd; and the Lord said, “These have no master; let each one go home in peace”’>>* (2 Chronicles 18:16), <<*So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals>>* (Ezekiel 34:5), and: <<*For the teraphim utter nonsense, and the diviners see lies; the dreamers tell false dreams, and give empty consolation. Therefore the people wander like sheep; they suffer for lack of a shepherd>>* (Zechariah 10:2). The arrest of Jesus left his disciples without such guidance: <<*And Jesus said to them, ‘You will all become deserters; for it is written, “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered”’>>* (Mark 14:27). God still wants

his sheep to have a shepherd! In the ultimate sense, this is fulfilled by Jesus Christ, who is the good shepherd, as was prophesied in the OT: <<*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth*>> (Micah 5:2-4), and then revealed in the NT: <<*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*>> (John 10:11). In an additional sense, this is also fulfilled by the NT office of pastor-teacher, because the Greek word for pastor is the word for shepherd, as used in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2. As 1 Peter 5:4 puts it, Jesus is the chief shepherd, and pastors are under-shepherds. The job of shepherds is simple: to feed (John 21:15-17), and to lead; to lead them out and bring them in, that is, to give guidance and direction for the sheep to follow. Jesus was also moved with compassion when he saw the people as sheep without a shepherd: <<*As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things*>> (Mark 6:34); Moses is showing the nature of Jesus by his concern. As did David, even though Saul was still the king at the time: <<*But all Israel and Judah loved David; for it was he who marched out and came in leading them*>> (1 Samuel 18:16).

¹⁸ So the Lord said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him; ¹⁹ have him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and commission him in their sight. ²⁰ You shall give him some of your authority, so that all the congregation of the Israelites may obey. ²¹ But he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the decision of the Urim before the Lord; at his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the Israelites with him, the whole congregation.’ ²² So Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation; ²³ he laid his hands on him and commissioned him – as the Lord had directed through Moses.

Numbers 27:18-23

Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him. Up to this point, Joshua was mostly known by his servant-like association with Moses: <<*So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into*

the mountain of God>> (Exodus 24:13). However, he also led the army out against the Amalekites: <<*Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some men for us and go out; fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand'*>> (Exodus 17:9). That time as Moses' humble servant prepared him to take the leadership he was now called to. It was a daunting task but one that he would not have to face alone: <<*I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go*>> (Joshua 1:9).

Some of your authority. Joshua will not have the direct communication with God that Moses had. Instead he will have to be instructed by Eleazar the high priest, who will use the Urim and Thummim to determine God's will: <<*For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts*>> (Malachi 2:7).

The Urim and Thummim were some sort of sacred lot and were part of the high priest's equipment. They may have been two stones of two different colours, a bright colour and a dark colour, perhaps, one representing a positive and the other a negative answer, that were kept in the 'breastpiece of judgement' of the priest's ephod; refer to Exodus 28:30 and Leviticus 8:8. They were the only legitimate means of directly seeking a 'yes' or 'no' answer from the Lord, apart from God's speaking directly to people.

He laid his hands on him and commissioned him. This public presentation and laying-on of hands on Joshua was important. It let the whole nation know that Joshua was now the leader and the nation should expect to follow him.