

Frequently Asked Questions About the Old Testament

SESSION 8 – NUMBERS 25-36, DEUTERONOMY 1-11

In Numbers 25:17 God tells the Israelites to treat the Midianites as an enemy. This is confusing because Moses is married to a Midianite woman. What was the problem?

The answer to this question can be found in Numbers 18, in which the Lord tells the people that the Midianites “treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the affair of Peor. . . .” In an attempt to stop Israel, the Midianites and the Moabites came up with a plan to get Israel to abandon the Lord and thereby lose His protection. To do this, Moabite women invited Israelite men to their fertility festival which involved Baal worship and sex with temple prostitutes. The command in Numbers 25:17 is a way of protecting the nation from such a deceitful attack.

–Don Porter

Numbers 28 talks about the offerings to be given to the Lord each day. Were these to be done by every person, family, or tribe?

There were a variety of sacrifices offered to the Lord and these were dictated largely by the calendar (Numbers 28-29). There were times when sacrifices were offered by individuals (and families), and on behalf of the nation as a whole. The enormous loss of life and shedding of blood was to be a constant reminder to the people of the seriousness of their sin in the eyes of God. The sacrificial system was meant to be serious and gruesome—sin is a very serious matter.

–Don Porter

Why did the women have to have their vows authorized by men

(Numbers 30:2ff.)?

The regulations were given to clear up any confusion at home when fathers and husbands left for war. With the men absent, the women would have to make decisions that would affect the family. These laws retained the right of husbands and fathers to have a say in these matters at a later date. The guidelines freed a woman from possible conflict between obligations to her father or husband and obligations to God.

– *The Quest Study Bible*

How can the total destruction of Midian in Numbers 31 be morally justified?

Was this action morally justified? Those who wish to argue that it was cruel and uncalled for will have to argue with God, for He commanded it. But it seems quite apparent in the light of all the circumstances and the background of this crisis that the integrity of the entire nation was at stake. Had the threat to Israel's existence as a covenant nation been dealt with any less severely, it is extremely doubtful that Israel would have been able to claim the Land of Promise as a sacred trust from God. The massacre was as regrettable as a radical surgery performed on the ailing body of a cancer victim. If his life is to be preserved, the diseased portion must be completely cut away.

– *Dictionary of Bible Difficulties*

What about the children who were killed in Midian—certainly they were innocent and not in a place to challenge God's purposes—how can you justify their destruction?

In *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel, author Norman Geisler responds to this question (in the context of the utter destruction of the Amalekites). His response is helpful in the case of Numbers 31 as well: "In that thoroughly evil and violent and depraved culture, there was no hope for those children. This nation was so polluted that it was like gangrene that was taking over a person's leg, and God had to amputate the leg or the gangrene would spread and there wouldn't be anything left. In a sense, God's action was an act of mercy. According to the Bible, every child who dies before the age of accountability goes to heaven to spend eternity in the presence of God. Now, if they had continued to live in that horrible society, past the age of accountability, they undoubtedly would have become corrupted and thereby lost forever. . . [Also], under the rules of conduct God had given to the Israelites, whenever they went into an enemy city they were to first make the people an offer of peace. The people had a choice: they could

accept that offer, in which case they wouldn't be killed, or they could reject the offer at their own peril."

–Lee Strobel, *The Case For Faith*.

How did God fight for Israel (3:22)?

Several things happened: (1) Rahab told the Israelite spies that God had caused Israel's enemies to be paralyzed with fear (Joshua 2:8-11). (2) God used the weather to aid Israel in battle—he sent lethal hailstones on the enemy and delayed the sunset until Israel had won the battle (Joshua 10:11-14). (3) God pronounced judgment on the enemy for their sins, allowing their sins finally to destroy them (Joshua 11:20).

– *The Quest Study Bible*

Why would anyone desire a visible image over an invisible God (4:15-18)?

People were accustomed to physical representations of gods. Such cultural customs could have become a temptation for the Israelites, since God had revealed himself only in words, not in form (v.15). Any attempt to portray God's image would have been utterly inadequate and ultimately misleading.

– *The Quest Study Bible*

How could the exact words of God in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17) be altered in any way by Moses in Deuteronomy 5:6-21?

It should be understood that the purpose of Deuteronomy was to furnish a selective paraphrase of the law of God revealed to Moses in the earlier three books: Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. It was not intended to be a word-for-word repetition of the text of those books but rather a homiletical, hortatory application of their teaching to the new generation. Those precepts and aspects of the law that would be most useful for the non-Levitical congregation were culled out and set before them in a hard-hitting yet encouraging fashion so that they would be ideologically prepared for the conquest and occupation of Canaan. Consequently it would be quite exceptional for the identical words to occur on a given subject, as between Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. There are variations in phraseology, but never in sense or essential teaching, as between those two books (or between Deuteronomy and Leviticus or Numbers, for that matter).

If God is fair and loving, why would he punish children for the sin of their parents (5:9)?

The Bible does not teach that God holds one person accountable for the sins of another. What it teaches is that the sins of one person can impact others. This is true in families, friendships and in every walk of life. We never sin in a vacuum! Our sins impact others. Often those we love the most.

God does not punish one person for the sins of another person (Ezekiel 18:18-20). A child or grandchild can feel the sting of the sins of the previous generation. Many children live with painful consequences of their parent's poor choices. But, these things are not punishments from God; they are the natural consequences of sin. We need to make a clear distinction between consequences and punishment.

–Kevin Harney

Does God hold people accountable for the sins of others?

No. This refers more to the “consequences” of sin than “judgment” for sin, though in a sense it is that as well. A generation can be burdened by the sins of their elders. The examples and behavior of some individuals affect the other family members. God, however, only judges a person for his or her own actions (see Ezekiel 18:20).

–The Quest Study Bible

Does prayer change God's mind (9:19)?

Though God knows before we pray what we will ask and how he will answer, it is spiritually beneficial for us to pray. Moses interceded on behalf of the people, and God, wanting to forgive, heard his prayer. But it seems that God would have destroyed the people, just as he said, had not Moses stood up for them. This is part of the mystery of how God and humankind work together.

–The Quest Study Bible

Throughout Leviticus and Numbers (for example, Numbers 18:11), the Lord instructs Moses to have Aaron perform “wave” offerings. What is a “wave” offering?

The “wave offering” was part of a fellowship (or peace) offering. The translation of the word “wave” stems from ancient rabbinic tradition. Though it’s possible that portions of sacrifices or small animals (14:12,24) were actually waved back and forth, the word was also used symbolically—as when the Levites were presented as a wave offering (Numbers 8:11). The idea probably refers to ‘lifting” the offering either physically or symbolically as a gift to the Lord. It is possible that this practice was picked up by other cultures and assumed different meanings, but this was undoubtedly the original intent of the instructions.

– The Quest Study Bible