

Numbers Chapter 31

Verses 1-54: "Midianites" comprised a part of a large confederation of tribes and were often associated with many smaller groups of people like the Ishmaelites, Moabites, Amalekites, and Ephrathites. Here the reference is to those associated with Moab (verses 8, 16; compare chapters 22 and 25). The decimation of the Midianites fulfilled the divine command given in (25:16-18), and cited again in (31:2). It also looks forward to the conquest of the Canaanites, who were to be treated in like manner (21:2-4, 32). Also, the distribution of the spoils among warriors, people, priests, and Levites served as a model for the big campaign to Palestine (verse 54).

Verses 1-12: This is pictured as the Lord's day of vengeance for the Midianites' seduction of Israel (in 25:1-13). Adultery carried the death penalty (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22), and that is what they had caused in relation to Israel, spiritual and physical adultery from Yahweh. Balaam was killed with the sword. Israel was commanded by the Lord to take vengeance on Midian because they were responsible for corrupting Israel at Peor (25:1-18).

Numbers 31:1 "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,"

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.

Numbers 31:2 "Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites: afterward shalt thou be gathered unto thy people."

"Gathered unto thy people": A euphemism for death (see Gen. 25:8, 17; 35:29).

This attack on the Midianites had been planned for quite some time. It appears, that this is the last thing that Moses is to head up. The LORD had already told him he would not go into the Promised Land. "Be gathered unto thy people" means he will die. This is the LORD's vengeance, here. He wants the Midianites destroyed, for what they had done to the Israelites.

Numbers 31:3 "And Moses spake unto the people, saying, Arm some of yourselves unto the war, and let them go against the Midianites, and avenge the LORD of Midian."

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 was 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 dishonor of his name.

The huge army of over 600,000 men would not be needed here. They arm just a few of their men. Moses had not started this war against Midian, until God ordered it. When these Midianite women had seduced the Israelites and mixed with them, it was against God as much as against the Israelites. These women had caused the men of Israel to commit adultery, and even caused them to bow to false gods.

Numbers 31:4 "Of every tribe a thousand, throughout all the tribes of Israel, shall ye send to the war."

Each of the non-priestly tribes of Israel play an equal role in the fighting force, as "a thousand from each tribe" were recruited when the Israelites went to war against the Midianites. After the battle, the plunder of the Midianites was divided equally between those who took part in the war and those who remained behind, for each played an important role in gaining the victory (31:15-54).

These means it will only take 12,000 men of war to destroy the Midianites.

Numbers 31:5 "So there were delivered out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand of [every] tribe, twelve thousand armed for war."

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.

Each of the 12 tribes furnished 1,000 men to go to war.

Numbers 31:6 "And Moses sent them to the war, a thousand of [every] tribe, them and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, to the war, with the holy instruments, and the trumpets to blow in his hand."

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 to die very soon. 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 (Num. 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.

"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 (Joshua 6:4). And Jarchi interprets them of the ark and plate of gold 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 a high priest was entrusted 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 (1 Sam. 23:6).

This was a holy war to clear the name of the LORD amongst the heathen. The priest Phinehas, son of Eleazar, went to war with them with the holy instruments and blew the alarm with the silver trumpet. Phinehas was the same one who had run the javelin through two of the sinners, and stopped the plague.

Numbers 31:7 "And they warred against the Midianites, as the LORD commanded Moses; and they slew all the males."

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.

"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 (Judges 6:1). These, as Aben Ezra observes, they slew those who were grown up. As for their little ones, those they spared and carried captive (Num. 31:9).

This was more of an annihilation of the men. It appears, they killed them all. When God went with them to battle, there was no problem winning.

Numbers 31:8 "And they slew the kings of Midian, beside the rest of them that were slain; [namely], Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, five kings of Midian: Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword."

Balaam's involvement with the Midianites in an attempt to seduce Israel (25:14-18; Rev. 2:14), cost him his life. God commanded his people to likewise take vengeance on the people of "Midian". The victims' list here includes five of their "kings". It turned out that seeing the sword of the Lord was not enough to bring "Balaam" to repentance and faith in Yahweh. A human "sword" sent him to his eternal reckoning.

We read earlier of the five kings of Midian. It appears here, that they were all killed. Balaam was killed also. It appeared he was in on the plot to infiltrate the Israelites. They probably were not killed in battle, but run through with the sword as an execution. These are probably not the entire Median army, but some in this area, because later we see the Medians again.

Numbers 31:9 "And the children of Israel took [all] the women of Midian captives, and their little ones, and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods."

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 Judges 6:1). 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.

It is interesting that they took the women and children. The LORD sometimes, will not allow this. The battle in the first place was because of the Midianite women. They have spoiled all the Midianite's goods.

Numbers 31:10 "And they burnt all their cities wherein they dwelt, and all their goodly castles, with fire."

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.

The Midianites were nomads and would not have built permanent type cities. Perhaps the cities were built by someone they had overrun.

Numbers 31:11 "And they took all the spoil, and all the prey, [both] of men and of beasts."

In their cities and castles.

“And all the prey, both of men and of beasts”: All sorts of cattle, oxen, sheep, and asses.

This just means they took everything of any value at all for themselves.

Verses 12-24: All the Midianites, except the virgin women, were to be put to death. Both the soldiers and the spoil needed to be cleansed.

Numbers 31:12 "And they brought the captives, and the prey, and the spoil, unto Moses, and Eleazar the priest, and unto the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the camp at the plains of Moab, which [are] by Jordan [near] Jericho."

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 people's things unto them, returning from the war with Midian.

"Unto the camp at the plains of Moab, which are by Jordan near Jericho" (see Num. 22:1). But they were stopped, and were not admitted into the camp until seven days after.

Moses and Eleazar had sent them to the battle, so they brought the spoil to Moses and Eleazar. Whatever they keep, must be divided among all the people.

Verses 13-18: Only the virgins of the women were allowed to survive and probably were allowed to marry Israelite warriors (Deut. 21:10-14).

Numbers 31:13 "And Moses, and Eleazar the priest, and all the princes of the congregation, went forth to meet them without the camp."

Attended, no doubt, with a proper retinue.

"Went forth to meet them without the camp": Partly to do honor to them, and to congratulate them on their victory. And partly to hinder them going into the camp directly, until they were purified (see Gen. 14:17).

They did not bring these Midianite women and children into the camp. All of the leaders went out to meet them, to inspect what they had done.

Numbers 31:14 "And Moses was wroth with the officers of the host, [with] the captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, which came from the battle."

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.

To win the war is one thing, but to leave the problem that caused the war is another. Moses is angry with the soldiers, for not following orders.

Verses 15-20: Moses gave this command because the Midianites had caused the people of God to "trespass against the Lord". For the Israelites to kill everyone except the young virgins would prevent further Midianite influence and eliminate their threat to the Israelites' inheritance. The ones who carried out this punishment became unclean and had to be purified with the "water" mixed with the ashes of the red heifer (19:2-10).

Numbers 31:15 "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.

The Midianite women had been the problem, in the first place. The lust of these Israelite men for these women it seems, has not gone away. They have plans of keeping these women for the men. Moses is really saying, "Why have you kept these evil women alive?"

Numbers 31:16 "Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD."

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 Baal-peor, 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 honor and glory.

"And there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord": For that sin; and in that plague 24,000 persons died (Num. 25:9).

They have not eliminated the problem. They have brought it home with them. The plague that swept through the Israelite camp, was because the men of Israel were sleeping with the Midianite women. Now, they have brought them all home with them, to further the sin. This would greatly anger God.

Numbers 31:17 "Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him."

The execution of all male children and women of child-bearing age insured the extermination of the Midianites and prevented them from ever again seducing Israel to sin. Reference to Midianites later (Judges 6:1-6), was to a different clan. It was the Midianites living in Moab who were destroyed here.

This seems cruel, but the LORD will not allow the teachings of Midian to come into the camp. Women, just like these, had caused the Israelite men to bow to false gods. This must not be again. The males among the little ones could come to maturity and cause terrible problems in the camp. Notice the young girls, who were not contaminated were left alive. This was not senseless killing. It was done to preserve the LORD as God among the Israelites.

Numbers 31:18 "But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves."

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.

They were to be slaves in the homes, and undoubtedly, concubines to some of the men. In some instances, they probably married some of the young men.

Verses 19-24: Every soldier and everything had to be purified. The former was purified with the water mixed with the ashes of the red heifer (19:2), and the latter by fire and water, due to their contact with the dead.

Numbers 31:19 "And do ye abide without the camp seven days: whosoever hath killed any person, and whosoever hath touched any slain, purify [both] yourselves and your captives on the third day, and on the seventh day."

Which was the time that anyone that touched a dead body remained unclean (Num. 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 day, and on the seventh day": Which were the days appointed for the purification of such that were polluted by touching dead bodies (Num. 19:11). And their captives, which were the little female 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."

We remember that anyone who had come near a dead body was unclean for 7 days. They must all, including the young Midianite women, go through the purification before they could enter the camp again. We read of this earlier of the washings on the third and seventh day. This had to do with the water of separation. The girls fell into the law about the stranger, and were purified by the water of separation.

Numbers 31:20 "And purify all [your] raiment, and all that is made of skins, and all work of goats' [hair], and all things made of wood."

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 (Num. 19:19). Some render the words, "purify yourselves, 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 Lev. 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 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 Lev. 15:12).

In chapter 19 of Numbers, we studied of how everything that had come in contact with the dead must be purified. They did this because no impure thing could come into the camp.

Numbers 31:21 "And Eleazar the priest said unto the men of war which went to the battle, This [is] the ordinance of the law which the LORD commanded Moses;"

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.

Eleazar is the one to advise them how to keep everything pleasing unto the LORD. He is the guardian of the spiritual aspect of these people.

Numbers 31:22 "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.

These were the precious metals they had spoiled from the Midianites.

Numbers 31:23 "Every thing that may abide the fire, ye shall make [it] go through the fire, and it shall be clean: nevertheless it shall be purified with the water of separation: and all that abideth not the fire ye shall make go through the water."

Either through the smoke of the fire, and so be purified by fumigating from below. Or be put into the fire itself, where though they might be melted as the above things. But 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 Num. 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.

All things made of these precious metals were to be melted for further use. Many false gods were made of silver and gold. It would be very important to melt those two metals. Things, like wood, that could not stand the fire would be washed with the purifying water.

Numbers 31:24 "And ye shall wash your clothes on the seventh day, and ye shall be clean, and afterward ye shall come into the camp."

As the leper did (Lev. 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.

Even the clothes they were wearing, must be purified before they could come into the camp. After the seven days of purification, they were allowed back into the camp.

Numbers Chapter 31 Questions

1. What did the LORD tell Moses to instruct the people to do?
2. What will happen to Moses, after this is over?
3. How many men from each tribe will go to war?
4. How had these people offended God?
5. How many men fought the war?
6. Who went with the soldiers to war?
7. What was his purpose for being there?
8. Who did the Israelites kill?
9. What happened to the five kings, and to Balaam?
10. What did the Israelites do with the rest of the people?
11. What did they do to the cities of Midian?
12. What kind of people were the Midianites?
13. Where did Moses, and Eleazar, and the princes meet with them?
14. What was Moses angry with them about?
15. What question did Moses ask them?
16. Why was it so bad to keep the women alive?
17. Who did Moses tell them to kill?
18. Who was spared death?
19. Why must they remain out of camp seven days?
20. How were the girls cleansed?

21. What else was cleansed with water?
22. What did they do with the precious metals, to make them clean?
23. When can they re-enter the camp?