

THE CHIEFTAINS' GIFTS: NUMBERS, CHAPTER 7

by

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According to Numbers 7, Israel's twelve tribal chieftains jointly contribute expensive gifts to the completed and consecrated Tabernacle consisting of six draught carts and twelve oxen for the Gershonite and Merarite Levites to haul the dismantled Tabernacle. Then, individually and in successive days, each chieftain contributes to the consecrated altar the identical gift, as follows: one silver bowl and one silver basin, each filled with choice flour (semolina) and oil for cereal offerings, one gold ladle filled with incense, and the same number and kind of sacrificial animals. The contribution of each chieftain is duly recorded and the totals for each gift are given at the end of the account (vv. 84–88). Some of these gifts, however, nettled the rabbis:

Three things which the chieftains did improperly the Holy One, blessed be He, accepted. They are as follows: In every other instance an individual may not present incense as a freewill-offering; but the princes brought each "one gold ladle of ten shekels, laden with incense" (Num 7:14). In every other instance an individual may not bring a purification offering except after becoming aware of his wrongdoing; but these brought a he-goat independently of any sin. In every other instance the offering of an individual does not override the Sabbath; but here the offering of the individual did override the Sabbath (*Num. R.* 13:2; cf. *Sipre* Num. 51; *b. Mo'ed Qat.* 9a).

There is yet another difficulty. The Tabernacle was completed on the first of Nisan, as explicitly stated in Exod 40:17, a date supported by R. Akiba (*Sipre* Num. 68; *b. Pesah* 90b) versus the main rabbinic position (*Sipre* Num. 44; Seder Olam 7) that the Tabernacle was erected on the twenty-third of Adar. This would imply that the Tabernacle and the priests were consecrated between the first and seventh of Nisan (cf. Lev 8:33) and that the offerings of the chieftains took place between the eighth and nineteenth of Nisan—overlapping the Passover!

In reaching for a solution, the first step is to negate the notion that these problems can be dismissed on the grounds that the entire account

is fictional and artificial and, hence, bears no correspondence to concrete dates and events (so Wellhausen, 1963, p. 179; Noth, 1966). B. A. Levine (1965) has demonstrated the antiquity of this account by comparing it with archival records of cult offerings in the ancient Near East. He finds that this document fits the typology of two-dimensional accounts where items are listed horizontally according to genre and where each genre column is summed up at the bottom of the list (cf. vv. 84–88). Other similarities between Numbers 7 and its ancient Near Eastern counterparts are: (1) Each column is added up preceded by the word for “total”: Sumerian ŠU.NIGIN, Akkadian *napharu*, Hebrew *kol* (vv. 85–88); (2) The standard measurements in weights are inserted parenthetically in the headings (vv. 13, 19, 25, etc.); (3) In Northwest Semitic inscriptions (Ugaritic, Aramaic, Phoenician, also Greek) the numeral, rather than the word for the numeral, follows each item (for the Bible see also Num 28–29; Josh 12:9–24), e.g., bulls, 2; rams, 5; he-goats, 5; yearling rams, 5 (vv. 17, 23, 29, etc.). Hittite cultic texts also conclude a description of the daily or festival ritual with a summary of the sacrifices offered (Dinçol and Darga, 1969–70, p. 105; Weinfeld, 1980, p. 82). Numbers 7, then, follows a two-dimensional scheme with the above-listed characteristics that obtained in anterior, contemporary, but not in later, cultures. Thus, the prevalence of this kind of archival notation in the ancient Near East puts the stamp of authority and antiquity upon this chapter.

This conclusion, however, only serves to underscore and aggravate the questions raised above: How could the authors of this document have conceived of a succession of twelve days of offerings by the chieftains of Israel that violates the sacrificial rules for individuals, the Sabbath, and the Passover? I submit that all these questions are resolved with one stroke as soon as it is realized that none of these offerings was actually sacrificed on the day it was brought to the Tabernacle. Separate days were ordained for the chieftains' contributions not to enable the altar to accommodate the large total of their animal offerings (Num 7:87–88). Rather, as Ramban has proposed (on Num 7:2), the purpose may well have been that on each day another chieftain would be honored and, through him, his tribe. In fact, that the animals are summed up at the end of this Tabernacle document can only mean that they were not sacrificed the very day they were contributed but were transferred (like the silver and gold vessels) to the charge of the sanctuary priests to be offered up in the public cult whenever needed.

Corroboration for this hypothesis stems from similar archival documents in the ancient Near East. There are Hittite texts which list both

objects and sacrificial ingredients not in sacrificial rites for the altar, but in inventories of donations to the temple treasury. For example "a mace of bronze, a copper knife, 10 scepters, a ring plated with silver . . . 1 handful of flour, 1 cup of beer" (Carter, 1962, n. 17; Weinfeld, 1983, p. 140). Indeed, the two-dimensional documents which deal with cult offerings, cited above, are not lists of sacrifices offered on a particular occasion but are inventories of gifts to the temple.

Support for this hypothesis also stems from the biblical text itself. First, it should be noted that all the sacrificial genres appear in the donations: burnt, cereal, well-being, and purification offerings. This means that the chieftains were intent on supplying an initial stock of animals for the public service. One sacrifice, however, is conspicuous by its absence: the ^ṣ*āšām*, the reparation offering. Its absence can now be readily explained: it is the *only* sacrifice that is exclusively individual and voluntary; it never appears in the fixed order of public worship. Moreover, only the assumption that the sacrificial animals were intended for public offerings explains why all the animals were males (cf. Lev 9:4; 23:19; Num 28–29); individual offerings could be females of the herd and flock in the case of the well-being offering (Leviticus 3) and had to be females in the case of the purification offering (Leviticus 4). Furthermore, the fact that the purification offering is mandatory, brought for acknowledged wrongdoing, and is not voluntary and that an individual may not bring an incense offering does not mean that the chieftains were granted a special dispensation (cf. *Menah* 50b), but rather that the chieftains brought them not for themselves but as a gift to the sanctuary for the public cult.

Lastly, by positing that the sacrificial ingredients were not offered up on the day they were contributed but kept in store by the priests, the four problems that plagued the rabbis are thereby circumvented: the prohibition against offering individual sacrifices on the Sabbath, the intervention of the Passover, the incense offering which an individual was not permitted to contribute, and the purification offering which could only be brought for one's acknowledged sin.

However, the theory that the chieftains' sacrificial donations were not offered up on the altar on the day of their contribution runs into the difficulty that the choice flour they brought was mixed with oil; since, ostensibly, it would quickly spoil, its sacrifice could not have been delayed. This objection was tested. Since the relative proportions of oil to flour are given (Num 15:1–10), it became possible for my doctoral student, Susan Rattray, to make up a batch and test its durability. Her sample was made on April 13, 1982. It was sealed in an ordinary plastic

container, placed in the cupboard, and never refrigerated. As of the date of this writing, October 15, 1985—three and a half years later—it is perfectly edible, with no trace of spoilage.

One final note. The alleged discrepancy of the overlapping dates (Sabbath and Passover) is obviated on other, philological grounds. The assumption that the chieftains began to bring their gifts on the day the Tabernacle was erected depends on translating the word *beyôm* in the opening verse Numbers 7 as “on the day (Moses completed).” Its accurate rendering is simply “when.”¹ This rendering is necessitated by the context: the consecration of the altar by its anointing (v. 1b) did not take place on one day but seven. The rendering “when” is also indicated for two other occurrences of this word in this chapter (vv. 10, 84). The chieftains did not bring their offerings *beyôm*, “on the day,” the altar was anointed (v. 10). The altar was anointed for seven days, not one (Exod 29:36; cf. Abравanel), and the chieftains brought their gifts over twelve days, not one. The same holds for *beyôm* of v. 84. It should be noted that this verse opens an inclusion which is closed by v. 88b, but instead of *beyôm*, the text there reads ³*aḥārê* “after.”²

The rendering of “when” for *beyôm* resolves another ancient crux. Having Israel’s chieftains referred to as the supervisors of the census (Num 1:2–16) and having them contribute carts to the Levite clans for their removal work after the latter’s census and job description (chapters 3 and 4) creates a discrepancy in chronology. The censuses took place immediately after the first day of the second month (Num 1:1), whereas the Tabernacle was erected on the first day of the first month (Exod 40:17). How then could the Levites be given the means to perform their labor before their labor was defined? Now, however, that the chieftains’ gifts have no fixed date there is no difficulty in the textual sequence which places the chieftains’ gifts to the Levites after their work assignment: the former no longer must be attributed to the day the Tabernacle was erected; it could well have taken place later, after the census.

In sum, the realization that the chieftains’ gifts of Numbers 7 is only an inventory of their contributions to the Tabernacle store for use in the

1. For other instances in the Priestly writings, see Lev 7:38; 14:2, 57; Num 3:1. The word *beyôm* in the Priestly writings can also denote “from the time” (e.g., Gen 2:4; 3:5; Lev 6:13; 7:36, 38; Ezek 38:18; 43:18). It is equivalent to *miyyôm*; the letters *mem* and *bet*, when serving as prepositions, are often interchangeable, especially in the Priestly texts (e.g., Exod 12:19; Lev 8:32; 14:18; 17:15; 22:4; cf. Saadiah; Ibn Janah, 1964, p. 84; Sarna, 1959).

2. For other examples of summaries framed by inclusion in the Priestly writings, see Lev 14:54–57; Num 5:29–30; Ezek 43:12.

public cult and not the individual sacrifices they offered up on the altar on the very day they brought them solves a host of alleged contradictions with the sacrificial system and the chronology and sequence of events.

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