

# NUMBERS

## Chapter 31

### *Vengeance on Midian*

**31** The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people.” **3** So Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the LORD's vengeance on Midian. **4** You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war.” **5** So there were provided, out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war. **6** And Moses sent them to the war, a thousand from each tribe, together with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand. **7** They warred against Midian, as the LORD commanded Moses, and killed every male. **8** They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of their slain, Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. And they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword. **9** And the people of Israel took captive the women of Midian and their little ones, and they took as plunder all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods. **10** All their cities in the places where they lived, and all their encampments, they burned with fire, **11** and took all the spoil and all the plunder, both of man and of beast. **12** Then they brought the captives and the plunder and the spoil to Moses, and to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the people of Israel, at the camp on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. **13** Moses and Eleazar the priest and all the chiefs of the congregation went to meet them outside the camp. **14** And Moses was angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war. **15** Moses said to them, “Have you let all the women live? **16** Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD. **17** Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. **18** But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him keep alive for yourselves. **19** Encamp outside the camp seven days. Whoever of you has killed any person and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves and your captives on the third day and on the seventh day. **20** You shall purify every garment, every article of skin, all work of goats' hair, and every article of wood.” **21** Then Eleazar the priest said to the men in the army who had gone to battle: “This is the statute of the law that the LORD has commanded Moses: **22** only the gold, the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead, **23** everything that can stand the fire, you shall pass through the fire, and it shall be clean. Nevertheless, it shall also be purified with the water for impurity. And whatever cannot stand the fire, you shall pass through the water. **24** You must wash your clothes on the seventh day, and you shall be clean. And afterward you may come into the camp.” **25** The LORD said to Moses, **26** “Take the count of the plunder that was taken, both of man and of beast, you and Eleazar the priest and the heads of the fathers' houses of the congregation, **27** and divide the plunder into two parts between the warriors who went out to battle and all the congregation. **28** And levy for the LORD a tribute from the men of war who went out to battle, one out of five hundred, of the people and of the oxen and of the donkeys and of the flocks. **29** Take it from their half and give it to Eleazar the priest as a contribution to the LORD. **30** And from the people of Israel's half you shall take one drawn out of every fifty, of the people, of the oxen, of the donkeys, and of the flocks, of all the cattle, and give them to the Levites who keep guard over the tabernacle of the LORD.” **31** And Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the LORD commanded Moses. **32** Now the plunder remaining of the spoil that the army took was 675,000 sheep, **33** 72,000 cattle, **34** 61,000 donkeys, **35** and 32,000 persons in all, women who had not known man by lying

with him. 36 And the half, the portion of those who had gone out in the army, numbered 337,500 sheep, 37 and the LORD's tribute of sheep was 675. 38 The cattle were 36,000, of which the LORD's tribute was 72. 39 The donkeys were 30,500, of which the LORD's tribute was 61. 40 The persons were 16,000, of which the LORD's tribute was 32 persons. 41 And Moses gave the tribute, which was the contribution for the LORD, to Eleazar the priest, as the LORD commanded Moses. 42 From the people of Israel's half, which Moses separated from that of the men who had served in the army — 43 now the congregation's half was 337,500 sheep, 44 36,000 cattle, 45 and 30,500 donkeys, 46 and 16,000 persons— 47 from the people of Israel's half Moses took one of every 50, both of persons and of beasts, and gave them to the Levites who kept guard over the tabernacle of the LORD, as the LORD commanded Moses. 48 Then the officers who were over the thousands of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, came near to Moses 49 and said to Moses, “Your servants have counted the men of war who are under our command, and there is not a man missing from us. 50 And we have brought the LORD's offering, what each man found, articles of gold, armlets and bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and beads, to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD.” 51 And Moses and Eleazar the priest received from them the gold, all crafted articles. 52 And all the gold of the contribution that they presented to the LORD, from the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, was 16,750 shekels.[a] 53 (The men in the army had each taken plunder for himself.) 54 And Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from the commanders of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the tent of meeting, as a memorial for the people of Israel before the LORD.

**31:1–24** The Lord declares a holy war. The Conquest and the Ethical Question of War) against the Midianites as one of Moses’ last actions before the end of his life. Moses was not motivated by petty jealousy; rather, the war was “the LORD’s vengeance” (v. 3) for the Midianites’ part in seducing the Israelites to engage in sexual immorality and to worship the Baal of Peor. (See 25:16–18, where the specific mention of Cozbi, a Midianite woman, heightens the anger expressed in ch. 31.) (CSB)

**31:2** *Avenge.* God was provoked to vengeance on the Midianites because they had seduced Israel to idolatry (v 16; ch 25). The war seems to focus specifically on Midianites involved with corrupting Israel (five kings, v 8), not the entire people of Midian. Ambrose: “A deeper vengeance is taken on fiercer foes, and on those that are false as well as on those who have done greater wrongs, as was the case with the Midianites” (NPNF 2 10:24). (TLSB)

*Midianites.* The nationality of Moses’ wife and her family (Ex 2:16–22). (TLSB)

*gathered to your people.* A euphemism for death (see, e.g., Ge 25:8, 17; 35:29). (CSB)

**31:4** *a thousand men from each of the tribes of Israel.* The burden of the holy war had to be shared equally among the tribes. (CSB)

**31:6** *Phinehas.* His zeal for the Lord’s honor led him to execute Zimri and Cozbi (25:8). Now he leads in the sacred aspects of the battle to demonstrate that this is a holy war. (CSB)

He, not Joshua or Eleazar, was chosen to direct this campaign, because he had proved that he was “jealous for his God” (25:6–13). (TLSB)

*the vessels of the sanctuary.* Lit, “the instruments of holiness,” which are “the trumpets for the alarm. (TLSB)

**31:7** *as the LORD commanded Moses.* The battle was the Lord’s. (CSB)

*killed every male.* Unlike the war of conquest, where the Canaanites would be wiped out (see pp 338–40), the soldiers plan to spare the Midianite women and children (v 9). (TLSB)

**31:8** *the kings of Midian.* Regional tribal rulers. (TLSB)

*They also killed Balaam.* Ch. 25 lacks the name of the principal instigator of the seduction of the Israelite men to the depraved worship of Baal. But here he is found among the dead. What Balaam had been unable to accomplish through acts of magic or sorcery (chs. 22–24) he was almost able to achieve by his advice to the Midianites (v. 16). (CSB)

**31:9–18** While the troops killed the men of Midian, they spared the women and children as plunder. Moses commanded that only the virgin women (who were thus innocent of the indecencies at Peor) could be spared; the guilty women and the boys (who might endanger the inheritance rights of Israelite men) were to be put to death (vv. 15–17). (CSB)

**31:9** *captive the women ... their little ones.* Common strategy in tribal warfare. Men of fighting age could not be absorbed into a new tribe. However, women and children could be assimilated and were shown mercy. Whereas other nations regarded the taking of women as part of the spoils of war (Jgs 5:30), Moses here distinguishes between the captives and the plunder. (TLSB)

**31:15–16** Moses is concerned about the assimilation of the women and the boys because the Midianites had specifically sought to corrupt Israel before. However, because adultery was punishable by death under the Law (Lv 20:10) Moses might have regarded the Midianites here as adulterous and deserving the full punishment. Though Moses' decisions accord with God's original command to avenge the people of Israel (v 2), the specific orders about treatment of prisoners do not have God's explicit command or approval (cf 2Ki 6:18–23). (TLSB)

*plague.* Refers to a disease that had earlier taken the lives of 24,000 Israelites. Same term used in 1Sm 6:5 (cf 1Sm 5:9, 12, where the men break out with tumors). The character of the plague is not explained. It is possible that it spread by sexual contact, which could have informed Moses' decisions about handling the Midianite prisoners. (TLSB)

**31:17–18** Moses' decision eerily parallels the practices of the Egyptians in Ex 1:22. (TLSB)

**31:18** *young girls.* Virgins, who had not been the cause of Israel's harlotry, were to be spared. They would most easily adapt to life in a new tribe and would also not carry sexually transmitted diseases. (TLSB)

**31:19–24** Since this was holy war, both people (vv. 19–20) and things (vv. 21–24) had to be cleansed (cf. 19:11–13). (CSB)

**31:19–20** *purify.* Those who had come in contact with corpses were to perform the prescribed purification rites (cf v 24).

**31:21–23** *pass through the fire.* All material objects of spoil were to be "purified with the water for impurity" (cf 19:9–19). Metals had to pass through fire to be clean. These actions, too, may point to concerns about the spread of disease. (TLSB)

*Dividing the Spoils*

<sup>25</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>26</sup> “You and Eleazar the priest and the family heads of the community are to count all the people and animals that were captured. <sup>27</sup> Divide the spoils between the soldiers who took part in the battle and the rest of the community. <sup>28</sup> From the soldiers who fought in the battle, set apart as tribute for the LORD one out of every five hundred, whether persons, cattle, donkeys, sheep or goats. <sup>29</sup> Take this tribute from their half share and give it to Eleazar the priest as the LORD’s part. <sup>30</sup> From the Israelites’ half, select one out of every fifty, whether persons, cattle, donkeys, sheep, goats or other animals. Give them to the Levites, who are responsible for the care of the LORD’s tabernacle.” <sup>31</sup> So Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the LORD commanded Moses. <sup>32</sup> The plunder remaining from the spoils that the soldiers took was 675,000 sheep, <sup>33</sup> 72,000 cattle, <sup>34</sup> 61,000 donkeys <sup>35</sup> and 32,000 women who had never slept with a man. <sup>36</sup> The half share of those who fought in the battle was: 337,500 sheep, <sup>37</sup> of which the tribute for the LORD was 675; <sup>38</sup> 36,000 cattle, of which the tribute for the LORD was 72; <sup>39</sup> 30,500 donkeys, of which the tribute for the LORD was 61; <sup>40</sup> 16,000 people, of which the tribute for the LORD was 32. <sup>41</sup> Moses gave the tribute to Eleazar the priest as the LORD’s part, as the LORD commanded Moses. <sup>42</sup> The half belonging to the Israelites, which Moses set apart from that of the fighting men— <sup>43</sup> the community’s half—was 337,500 sheep, <sup>44</sup> 36,000 cattle, <sup>45</sup> 30,500 donkeys <sup>46</sup> and 16,000 people. <sup>47</sup> From the Israelites’ half, Moses selected one out of every fifty persons and animals, as the LORD commanded him, and gave them to the Levites, who were responsible for the care of the LORD’s tabernacle. <sup>48</sup> Then the officers who were over the units of the army—the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds—went to Moses <sup>49</sup> and said to him, “Your servants have counted the soldiers under our command, and not one is missing. <sup>50</sup> So we have brought as an offering to the LORD the gold articles each of us acquired—armlets, bracelets, signet rings, earrings and necklaces—to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD.” <sup>51</sup> Moses and Eleazar the priest accepted from them the gold—all the crafted articles. <sup>52</sup> All the gold from the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds that Moses and Eleazar presented as a gift to the LORD weighed 16,750 shekels. <sup>53</sup> Each soldier had taken plunder for himself. <sup>54</sup> Moses and Eleazar the priest accepted the gold from the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds and brought it into the Tent of Meeting as a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD.

**31:26–35** Another aspect of holy war was the fair distribution of the spoils of war, both among those who fought in the battle and among those who stayed with the community, with appropriate shares to be given to the Lord, whose battle it was (v. 28). (CSB)

**31:27** *into two parts.* All booty was to be shared equally by soldiers and civilians. The former were required to take from their half and give the priests one out of 500; the noncombatants contributed from their part one out of 50 to the Levites. (TLSB)

**31:32–47** The Midianite tribe was wealthy. Since there were 32,000 young women, the total tribe had likely numbered more than 100,000. However, this is clearly not the full number of Midianites, but a local group. (TLSB)

**31:49** *not a man missing.* The battle was miraculous. (TLSB)

**31:50** When the military leaders saw that they had suffered no casualties, they realized how good the Lord had been to them. Out of gratitude, they brought voluntary offerings to Moses and Eleazar. (TLSB)

**Ch 31** Moses is given a final assignment. He is to oversee the destruction of a group of Midianites who had tempted Israel to idolatry and brought a plague among them. God acts forcefully to protect His people from falling away. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the high priest, coordinates the attack. The victory secures the east bank of the Jordan, from which the Israelites will conquer Canaan. The tactics described here were meant for this specific situation and cannot be used by people today as a guide to “holy war.” Vengeance belongs to God (Dt 32:35) and is enacted through His chosen authorities, not by individuals. Pray for the safety and peace of soldiers, police, and all in such callings. Entrust your life, health, and

future to the one and only Savior, who is strong to deliver. • “Entrust your days and burdens To God’s most loving hand; He cares for you while ruling The sky, the sea, the land. For He who guides the tempests Along their thund’rous ways Will find for you a pathway And guide you all your days.” Amen. (LSB 754:1) (TLSB)