

## THE WOODGATHERERS' SABBATH: A LITERARY STUDY OF NUMBERS 15:32-36

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This study examines the Sabbath narrative in Num 15:32-36 from the contextual perspective of cultic legislation prescribed in Num 15 and attempts to demonstrate the literary relationship that seems to exist between these legal prescriptions and the wood-gatherer's rebellious act on Sabbath. Furthermore, the Sabbath narrative seems to contain intertextual connections with the account of Israel's life in slavery (Exod 5), which, according to the narrative context in Num 14 and 16, appears to the Israelites to be a more favorable choice than to continue the journey to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Therefore, the case of the man gathering wood on Sabbath not only illustrates the law and the consequences of defiant sin, but reveals the significance that the Sabbath carries for the covenant relationship of the whole Israelite community, as well as for each individual Israelite as a liberated slave from Egypt.

*Key Words: Sabbath, defiant sin, rebellion, woodgatherer*

### 1. Introduction

The Pentateuch tells the incident of an unnamed man gathering wood on Sabbath in the wilderness. The man is caught and brought before Moses, Aaron, and the whole congregation of Israel. The narrative briefly records this event, with the only speech coming directly from YHWH, who declares: "The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp" (Num 15:35). The congregation acts immediately and stones the man to death according to the command of YHWH.

At first glance this brief report seems to be used as an example of defiant sin in the context of the cultic legislation about offerings for expiation of inadvertent versus defiant sin (vv. 22-31) that precedes the narrative about the wood-gatherer. Some commentators conclude that the narrative serves to impress upon the hearer/reader the severity of

religious prohibitions, especially the severity of the Sabbath command.<sup>1</sup> However, the narrative context, which deals with Israel's community and leadership crisis in the desert (Num 14 and 16), adds more information and shows that the focal subject in the wood-gatherer's case is the significance of the Sabbath as a sign of freedom from slavery and a solemn and binding agreement between YHWH and each individual of the Israelite congregation.

In scholarly opinions, Num 15 is viewed as a strange collection of cultic laws<sup>2</sup> and as an appendix to other cultic codes, especially those of Lev 4-5.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the section on inadvertent versus defiant sin in Num 15:22-31 is seen as full of difficulties<sup>4</sup> and, in Milgrom's words, it "may be the displaced conclusion of another legal section."<sup>5</sup>

When analyzing the literary structure of Num 15, several significant characteristics and subjects establish the building blocks of this chapter, and in so doing lead to the narrative section on the Sabbath. These building blocks are (1) Num 15 consists of seven laws concerning offerings and violations of both the congregation and the individual; (2) the offerings mentioned in Num 15 consist of burnt offerings and offerings for special vows, freewill offerings, or well-being offerings (vv. 3, 8); (3) these offerings may be performed "at your appointed times" (v. 3); (4) the verb "gather" (vv. 32, 33) describes deliberate activity on the part of the wood-gatherer, in violation of repeated divine commands against work on the Sabbath (Exod 16:28, 29; 20:9, 10; 31:14, 15; 35:2), thereby revealing his rebellious attitude toward YHWH and rejection of the liberation from slavery; and (5) the tassels on the garments are required to remind the Israelites of the laws of the covenant (Num 15:37-41).

## 2. Literary Analysis

### 2.1 Literary Structure

The literary structure of Num 15 shows that the defiant sin of one individual on the Sabbath affects the whole congregation. The structure of Num 15 pointed out by Sailhamer favors the literary unity of this chapter by showing that it consists of seven laws, followed by the narrative of the

<sup>1</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 386.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 126.

<sup>3</sup> Levine, 386.

<sup>4</sup> Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar: Numbers* (Jerusalem: Haomanim, 1995), 150.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 405.

man gathering wood on Sabbath.<sup>6</sup> The first three laws specify in ascending order the amounts of grain and drink offerings that must accompany each animal sacrifice, sheep or goat, ram, and bull, in accordance with its size or value.<sup>7</sup> The fourth law prescribes a different kind of grain offering, a cake made from the dough of the first fruits of the land. The last three laws deal with expiation offerings for inadvertent sins of the whole congregation as well as the offering for the individual followed by the extirpation of the defiant sinner, for whom no offering is possible. The seven laws are as follows:

1. Grain and drink offerings with a lamb (vv. 3-5)
2. Grain and drink offerings with a ram (vv. 6-7)
3. Grain and drink offerings with a bull (vv. 8-16)
4. Offering of a cake from the first dough (vv. 17-21)
5. Offering for the inadvertent sin of the whole community (vv. 22-26)
6. Offering for the inadvertent sin of an individual (vv. 27-29)
7. Penalty for a defiant sin (vv. 30-31)

Numbers 15:22-36 includes the legal prescriptions for inadvertent and defiant sin and the Sabbath narrative, and displays an interesting chiasmic arrangement by parallelisms (especially through repetitions of the expression "all the congregation") and contrasts between different parts:

A But when you unwittingly fail and do not observe all these commandments, which YHWH has spoken to Moses, even all that YHWH has commanded you through Moses, from the day when YHWH gave commandment and onward throughout your generations, then it shall be, if it is done unintentionally, without the knowledge of the congregation, that all the congregation (כל־העדה) shall offer one bull for a burnt offering, as a soothing aroma to YHWH, with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the ordinance, and one male goat for a sin offering (vv. 22-24).

B Then the priest shall make atonement for all the congregation (כל־העדה) of the Israelites, and they will be forgiven; for it was an error, and they have brought their offering, a food gift to YHWH and their sin offering before YHWH, for their error. So all the congregation (כל־העדה) of the Israelites will be forgiven, with the alien who

<sup>6</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 390.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 620.

sojourns among them, for it happened to all the people through error (vv. 25-26).

X Also if one person sins unintentionally, then he shall offer a one year old female goat for a sin offering. The priest shall make atonement before YHWH for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven. You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them (vv. 27-29).

X' But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming YHWH; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of YHWH and has broken his commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him (vv. 30-31).

B' Now while the Israelites were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation (פְּלִי־הַעֲדָה); and they put him in custody because it had not been declared what should be done to him. Then YHWH said to Moses, "The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation (פְּלִי־הַעֲדָה) shall stone him with stones outside the camp" (vv. 32-35).

A' So all the congregation (פְּלִי־הַעֲדָה) brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones and he died, just as YHWH had commanded Moses" (v. 36).

This chiastic structure is built upon the concept of Israel as a community and its involvement in inadvertent versus defiant sin. The phrase "all the congregation" occurring three times in the passage about inadvertent sin (A and B) corresponds to the threefold occurrence in the passage about defiant sin (B' and A'). The center of the chiasm (X and X') focuses on the distinction between inadvertent versus defiant sin and emphasizes the same law for the native and the alien.

The passage on inadvertent sins of the community (A and B) prescribes that "all the congregation" shall offer one bull for a burnt offering with its accompaniments, as prescribed in Num 15:1-10, and one

male goat for a sin offering. Then the priest will make atonement for "all the congregation" and "all the congregation" will be forgiven (vv. 24, 25, 26). The passage on defiant sin narrates the case of the wood-gatherer as an individual person (B' and A') who sinned against the Lord. The wood-gatherer was brought before Moses and Aaron and "all the congregation."<sup>8</sup> Moses, after inquiring with YHWH, received the instruction that "all the congregation" shall stone the man to death outside the camp. "All the congregation" followed this command, took the man outside the camp, and stoned him to death (vv. 33, 35, 36). The whole congregation was called to take up a certain responsibility by imposing capital punishment on this man.

This structure supports the literary unity of Num 15:22-36 and shows that the focus of the text is placed upon the specific role of the whole congregation, with one law for both the native and the alien (see center X). The Sabbath narrative involves the whole congregation, despite the fact that the rebellious act of wood-gathering on Sabbath was the sin of one individual person and not that of the community. This shows that the Sabbath contains a decisive meaning for the covenantal relationship between the whole congregation and YHWH. The sin of one individual performed on the Sabbath affected and disturbed the life of the whole community.

## 2.2 Key Words

Key words in Num 15:32-36 show that the Sabbath is the day that decides between life of slavery and life of freedom. Various readings of this passage propose a close connection between this narrative about gathering wood on Sabbath, the narrative about gathering manna on Sabbath (Exod 16:5, 23), and the prohibition of kindling a fire on Sabbath (Exod 35:3). Weingreen, in dealing with Num 15:32-36 in a critical way, suggests that the gathering of wood on Sabbath could have been construed as being a manifest prelude to the kindling of fire.<sup>9</sup> Levine assumes that in this instance, wood was being gathered in order to make a fire for cooking, which is expressly forbidden on Sabbath according to Exod 35:3.<sup>10</sup>

Gane approaches Num 15:32-36 from a thematic perspective and shows that this narrative illustrates inexpressible sin because "the man violated the Sabbath command of the Decalogue (Exod 20:8-11), of which the people were reminded every weekend when they received a double

<sup>8</sup> This is not the case in Lev 24:10-16, the narrative of the blasphemer, which displays parallels with Num 15:32-36. The blasphemer was brought only before Moses.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Weingreen, "Case of the Woodgatherer: Numbers 15:32-36," *VT* 16 (1966): 362.

<sup>10</sup> Levine, 399.

portion of manna on Friday and none on the Sabbath (16:22-30)<sup>11</sup> by gathering wood for a fire even though “the climate was warm and the people had manna to eat (Exod 16:35). So a fire for warmth or cooking would not have been urgent even if it were not Sabbath.”<sup>12</sup>

However, one verb reveals a different aspect that scholars have so far more or less neglected. This is the verb *קָטַף* “gather” which occurs eight times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>13</sup> The Pentateuch employs this verb four times, twice when describing the toil and oppression of the Israelites in Egypt (Exod 5:7, 12) and twice when narrating the wood-gatherer’s behavior on Sabbath after his deliverance from Egypt (Num 15:32, 33). The telling link that Num 15 draws between the Israelite slaves who were forced to gather straw to make bricks and the man gathering wood on Sabbath reveals the intention of the text to show that the Israelite man, even though freed from slavery, consciously chose to act against the law of freedom and thereby placed himself back into the position of a slave.<sup>14</sup>

After the man was found gathering wood on Sabbath, he was kept in custody (verb *נָח*). The importance of the verb *נָח* “rest” is unquestionable in the context of the Sabbath (Exod 16:23, 24, 33, 34; 20:11; 23:12; Deut 5:14). Here also, in Num 15:34, the verb *נָח* identifies the Sabbath as the day of rest of “YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2), for it is this same Lord who “rested on the seventh day” after he “made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them” (Exod 20:11). The hip’il form of the verb *נָח* in close connection with the Sabbath in Num 15:34 shows that the man “was caused to rest” by Moses, Aaron, and the whole congregation, for, indeed, it was Sabbath, the day of rest. Sadly, this rest that he could have enjoyed in freedom, he now had to endure in confinement as a “slave.”

While the question what to do with this man was initially Moses’ and Aaron’s concern, it has also produced much scholarly discussion in studies of the Hebrew Bible. The rabbis argued that “our Master Moses knew that the wood-gatherer [had incurred the penalty of] death, as it is said, ‘He who desecrates it shall be put to death’ (Exod 31:14), but did not

<sup>11</sup> Gane, 622.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Exod 5:7, 12; Num 15:32, 33; 1 Kgs 17:10, 12; Zeph 2:1.

<sup>14</sup> See the recent article by Novick who briefly alludes to this aspect of the verb “gather.” Tzvi Novick, “Law and Loss: Response to Catastrophe in Numbers 15,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 101 (2008): 5.

know by what mode of execution he should be killed."<sup>15</sup> Moses then consulted the divine oracle and the response was "death by stoning"<sup>16</sup> Milgrom comes to the conclusion that this answer is unconvincing and proposes that the case of the wood-gatherer provided the precedent for the principle that all work on Sabbath would be punishable by death and be "cut off," because this narrative was placed here in juxtaposition to the law of Num 15:30-31 for the reason that violation of the Sabbath shall be not only punished by being "cut off," but also by stoning to death.<sup>17</sup>

In his study on defiant or "high-handed" sins versus inadvertent sins, Gane concludes that "wrongs that are open, bold, and shameless . . . may be undetectable by human beings,"<sup>18</sup> however, before God these sins cannot be covered up.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the wood-gatherer, the context shows that he committed openly defiant sin that could not be expiated through animal sacrifice because of the rebellious attitude and affront against the authority of YHWH. The expression "high-handed" (Num 15:30), signifies "the physical gesture of the raised hand, with or without a weapon in it, which indicates that one is triumphantly determined to fight and to win."<sup>20</sup>

The laws about inadvertent versus defiant sin in Num 15:22-31 seem to contrast expiation and forgiveness as a result of the sacrifice that was available for inadvertent sins against the severity of being "cut off" that cannot be reversed in the case of defiant sins. The strategic positioning of these laws between narratives that describe open rebellion (Num 14 and 16) is highlighted by the narrative of the wood-gatherer, who committed inexpiable violation of the Sabbath with the result of being "cut off" according to the law in Num 15:30-31 and put to death by the Israelite congregation.

<sup>15</sup> *Sanh.* 78b.

<sup>16</sup> *Sif. Num.* 112; *Sif. Emor* 14:5; *Targ. Jon.* on v. 32; *Shab.* 96b.

<sup>17</sup> Milgrom, *Numbers*, 408, 409.

<sup>18</sup> Roy Gane, "Numbers 15:22-31 and the Spectrum of Moral Faults," in *Inicios, Paradigmas y Fundamentos: Estudios teológicos y exegeticos en el Pentateuco*, ed. Gerald Klingbeil (Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2004), 155.

<sup>19</sup> See Achan's sin that was revealed by God (Josh 7).

<sup>20</sup> Caspar J. Labuschagne, "The Meaning of *beyad rama* in the Old Testament," in *Von Kanaan bis Kerala: Festschrift for J. P. M. van der Ploeg*, ed. W. C. Delsman et al. (AOAT 211, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker/Neukirchener, 1982), 146.

### 3. Theological Implications

#### 3.1 Sabbath and Rebellion

The narrative context of Num 15, which deals with corporate rebellion of the Israelite community in Num 14 and 16, may reveal further information regarding the crucial aspect of the Sabbath within the covenant relationship between God and Israel. The context recounts the crisis of the congregation and its leaders during the desert journey and shows that this crisis became extremely serious after the discouraging report of ten of the twelve spies so that "the whole congregation" regretted leaving Egypt and were determined to appoint a leader to take them back to slavery (Num 14:2-4). Only because of the intense intervention by Moses and Aaron before the congregation and before YHWH does the story in Num 14 disclose a turn by the remark "and the people mourned greatly" (Num 14:39).

The narrative that follows is divided in two parts, Num 14:40-45 and Num 21:1-3. Numbers 14:40-44 tells that the people mourned greatly after YHWH's word that they will die in the wilderness and after they witnessed the abnormal death of the ten spies (vv. 20-35). However, they rose up on the next morning, went up to the top of the mountain, and exclaimed boldly: "See, here we are, we will go up to the place that YHWH has promised, for we have sinned" (v. 40). Against Moses' warning about the Amalekites and Canaanites and against the direct command not to go to war, the people went up heedlessly or conceitedly, but Moses and the ark of the covenant remained in the camp. The end of the story reveals that "the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down, and struck them and beat them down as far as Hormah" (v. 45). Then, the story is picked up again in Num 21:1-3, telling of Israel's victory, the subsequent vow to YHWH, and the positive outcome at Hormah, "So Israel made a vow to YHWH and said: 'If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.' YHWH heard the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites; then they utterly destroyed them and their cities. Thus the name of the place was called Hormah."

In Num 16 corporate rebellion does not come about "heedlessly" by a chaotic crowd (Num 14:44) but is well-organized by Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On together with 250 of the most prestigious leaders of the Israelite congregation (Num 16:2). The issue of the revolt is leadership by Moses and Aaron, and God himself issued and executed the capital punishment: "YHWH created a creation," or "YHWH brought about an entirely new thing" (Num 16:30) when "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up" (v. 32).



Numbers 15, with its laws on offerings and their accompaniments and the prescription about inadvertent sin of the whole congregation and defiant sin of the individual, is placed in between these narratives and implicitly promises to the Israelite community that in spite of what happened in Num 14, the younger generation will enjoy life in the Promised Land in the future, because God regulates such life.

Novick argues that the question of Moses, Aaron, and the congregation does not concern the content of the covenant law, but its applicability and asks the question: Does the covenant law that prohibits work on Sabbath (Exod 20:8-11; 31:12-17) remain valid and in force even for the generation that will not enter the Promised Land according to the words of YHWH in Num 14:22-35?<sup>21</sup> Novick holds that although the wood-gatherer acts alone, he gives expression through his action to the doubt of the whole congregation. For the law, under which the wood-gatherer must die, is well known, but the people wonder, rather, whether the wood-gatherer is correct in supposing that the law no longer carries force.<sup>22</sup>

In response to Novick's argumentation, three particular observations show that the narrative context does not leave the impression that the covenant, including the law of the Sabbath, is no longer valid for the adult generation of the Israelites in the wilderness. Rather, the covenant between God and Israel and the commandments have binding force for the wilderness generation because of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness:

First, after the people's rebellion, Moses pleaded with almost the same words that he used after the fiasco with the golden calf (Exod 34:6-7) and likewise YHWH grants forgiveness (Num 14:20). This act is made possible because of YHWH's faithfulness to his covenant relationship with Israel. He even issues a further command, namely to turn around and set out toward the Red Sea (Num 14:25, 41-43).

Second, the promise of YHWH that the new generation will enter the Promised Land implies the assignment of a significant role to the parents in the lives of their children as the future generation. They have to take upon themselves the responsibility in guiding and teaching their children the law of the covenant over the course of almost forty years of their desert journeys so that the children will reach the land that the parents failed. Furthermore, the command to make tassels on their garments that immediately follows the narrative of the wood-gatherer is given for the specific purpose so "that you may remember to do all my commandments

<sup>21</sup> Novick, 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*; Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Mikra ki-Pheshuto: The Bible According to Its Literal Meaning* (New York: Ktav, 1969), 1:268.

and be holy to your God" (Num 15:40). This context shows that all the commandments are in effect even for the adult generation destined to die in the desert.

Third, the book of Numbers shows that the daily miracle of the gift of the manna including the manna miracle of the Sabbath did not cease after YHWH's pledge that the adult generation will die in the wilderness but continued for the entire time (Num 11:1-9; 21:5). This miraculous event implies that the prohibition of work on Sabbath was in force over the entire period of the forty years in the desert (Exod 16:35; Josh 5:12).

These contextual characteristics imply that the Sabbath is a testing marker for the people's loyalty toward the covenant with God. The rebellious act of the wood-gatherer occurs in between the corporate rebellions of Num 14 and 16 and seems to function as a microcosm of the whole Israelite congregation when they rebelled and preferred slavery in Egypt to leadership by God under Moses and Aaron. The wood-gatherer acted out his personal decision to openly renounce the freedom gained by his liberation from slavery and demonstrated his choice to turn back to Egypt. He chose the Sabbath to show his determination to break out of the covenant relationship with YHWH, for it is indeed the Sabbath that signified his personal covenant relationship with YHWH (Exod 31:12-17). By requiring the whole congregation to stone this man, God appealed to the whole congregation to reject the rebellious attitude that in a larger sense they all shared. Thus the narrative context of Num 15 reveals that the Sabbath is indeed the sign of freedom from slavery and the individual person's behavior on the Sabbath shows his choice between "going back to Egypt" (Num 14:4) or going forward to "enter the land, which YHWH is giving you" (Num 15:2).

### 3.2 Sabbath and Remembering

The law that follows the narrative of the wood-gatherer instructs the Israelites to make tassels for themselves in order to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord. The Pentateuch uses the two verbs "remember" and "see, look" in close relationship only in the context of the covenant in two places, in Gen 9:16 and Num 15:39. Thus the instruction to make tassels in order to look at and remember may indicate an allusion to God himself who once promised Noah and his family to look at the rainbow in the clouds and remember the everlasting covenant between himself and every living being on the earth (Gen 9:16). Now after the tragedy of the wood-gatherer that affected the whole congregation, the people are asked to imitate God who remembers his covenant when he looks at the sign of the covenant. The people also, are asked to look and remember in order to fulfill their part of the covenant by keeping or

doing all the commandments (Num 15:37-41). Thus, the prohibition of gathering wood on Sabbath is not limited to the wilderness. It promotes Sabbath ethics that reach far into the future, when each generation and each individual is called to live a life free of slavery and its oppression.

This law further evokes the narrative of the spies in Num 13-14 by striking verbal connections. According to Num 15:39, the Israelites are called to look at the tassels and remember God's commandments. By doing this they will not "explore" or "stray" adulterously after their own heart or after their own eyes. The tassels are a reminder of the sin of the spies, who explored the land and saw tall men, and in their own eyes they saw themselves as grasshoppers. Then they discouraged the Israelites who strayed from God (Num 13:32-33; 14:33).<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, the people needed tassels and cords<sup>24</sup> to "do all my commandments and be holy to your God" (Num 15:40) and remember that "I am YHWH your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt to be your God; I am YHWH your God" (Num 15:41). These last words fit in well with the meaning of the Sabbath as YHWH's sign of freedom from Egyptian slavery. Indeed, violation of the Sabbath demonstrates revolt against YHWH, who liberated Israel from slavery. The narrative of the wood-gatherer is incorporated in the overall theme of the covenant, where the Sabbath constitutes the essence of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

<sup>23</sup> Gane, 622; Novick, 3.

<sup>24</sup> On the violet cords attached to the tassels in the context of the high priest's robe. See Gane, 623.