

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript
Episode 206
The 70 Bulls of the Feast of Tabernacles
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Episode Summary

Numbers 29:12-34 describes the sacrifices involved in the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, called in Hebrew, the Feast of Sukkot (“Booths”). Included in those sacrifices were 70 bulls, a number that far exceeds any other Israelites festival. Scholars have taken note of the number and speculated that it has some relationship to the number of the sons of God allotted to the nations in the judgment at Babel (Deut 32:8-9; cp. Genesis 10’s 70 nations). Some believe the passage is a vestige of polytheism (the bulls are offered to the gods of the nations) or that it describes an atonement ritual for the 70 nations of Genesis 10. In this episode of the podcast we examine these opinions and offer another interpretation, one that sees a connection to the Deuteronomy 32 worldview, but that focuses more on the meaning of the Feast of Sukkot.

Links:

Dr. Noga Ayali-Darshan: **Sukkot’s Seventy Bulls**: The Torah’s adaptation of a polytheistic ancient West-Semitic custom of sacrificing to seventy gods

The Meaning of Sukkot

The Seventy Bulls Sacrificed at Sukkot (Num 29:12-34) in Light of a Ritual Text from Emar (Emar 6, 373), VT 65 (2015)

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 206: The Seventy Bulls of the Feast of Tabernacles. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. How are you doing, sir?

MH: Pretty good. You know, just listening to the title made me think that there's a joke in there about "bull" or "no bull" somewhere. [laughs] What can we do?

TS: When I think of it, the first thing that comes to my mind is the slaughterhouse. I can imagine the sea of red after 70 bulls.

MH: 'Cause you're from Texas. [laughs]

TS: That's like a feedlot right there, I mean...

MH: Yeah, I guess it would be.

TS: We probably should have got some steak sponsors for this episode.

MH: [laughs] You're right!

TS: Maybe we can go back and do that.

MH: It may be too late for that. But that's not a bad idea, I guess.

TS: This is our first of several single topic episodes so... Was there a reason why you picked this one?

MH: Well, this is something that I've... I can't remember how I got the question. Probably email. It may have been in some Q&A thing somewhere, but someone asked about, "Hey, are the 70 bulls of Sukkot..." (which is the Hebrew term for the feast of Tabernacles in Numbers 29—that's our passage—Numbers 29:12-34)... "Is the number 70 significant? Does this have something to do with the Sons of God and the nations that were divided and allotted to the Sons of God and all that stuff?" So it actually derives from that question that I got quite some time ago. So here we are. That's how we came to this. So this is sort of an extended Q&A. We needed one full episode for this.

Well, as we get into it, we're going to post a link to a couple of things here. There's an online source about this that was authored by Dr. Noga Ayali-Darshan, who I believe is over at the Hebrew University in Israel. I think that's where she's still at. But she has a journal article—a published journal article, scholarly article—that was published in 2015 called "The Seventy Bulls Sacrificed at Sukkot: Numbers 29:12-34 in Light of a Ritual Text from Emar." Now that article is not obtainable for free online, but Professor Ayali-Darshan actually created a shorter version of that for the interested layperson, and that *is* online. So we're going to post a link to that, and that particular article is entitled this (it's kind of an inflammatory title—I guess you need that for online stuff)... It's "Sukkot's Seventy Bulls: The Torah's Adaptation of a Polytheistic Ancient West-Semitic Custom of Sacrificing to Seventy Gods." We'll have a link to that online so people can go read that. Now I'm going to interact with both the online source

and her journal article. We're going to be referencing Milgrom's Commentary on the Book of Numbers and we'll also put a link to www.jewfaq.org about the holiday of Sukkot just so people can get familiar with it. I'm going to interact with this material and I'm going to disagree with Ayali-Darshan as far as her conclusion—the trajectory she goes off on with respect to this passage. There's something actually in Milgrom's commentary that I think at least hints at a better approach than, say, the Israelites were offering to 70 foreign gods.

So with that as a setup, let's just take a look at the... I'm not going to go through all the verses in the passage because it's "this day they offer this many bulls and this many lambs" and all that sort of stuff. The reference is Numbers 29:12-34 if you do want to go read through the whole thing. The point is that if you count all the bulls offered in that passage, they add up to 70. And again, the number is what drew the initial interest as far as the question.

5:00 Now to get us rolling here, I'm going to quote from her online article (Ayali-Darshan's online article, the shorter version). And she writes this. This will help to set up the whole topic:

In describing the offerings for Sukkot [the Hebrew term for what our English Bibles have as the Feast of Tabernacles], the holiday offering section in Parashat Pinchas stipulates the sacrifice of a total of seventy bulls as burnt offerings spread over the seven-day autumn pilgrimage festival (Numbers 29:12-34), in addition to the other sacrifices of the day.

So this isn't the only thing that gets sacrificed. You've got 70 bulls and lots of other things. But the point of interest is the 70.

This huge number of offerings is striking, especially in comparison with other Pentateuchal festivals, none of which requires more than two bulls per day...

Scholars have suggested that the double number of rams and lambs on Sukkot relative to *Matzot*, and the unparalleled seventy bulls sacrificed during the seven-day autumnal festival, highlight its importance in the Israelite calendar. It is, indeed, referred to as "the Festival" (הַחֵדֶּה)—without any further identification in the description of Solomon's dedication of the temple (1Kings 8:65), in the law of Ezekiel (45:25), and Tannaitic texts (cf. m. Rosh Hashanah 1:2).

Now what she's saying is look, the fact that you have so many animals offered for this particular festival must mean it had special importance. And it is called, "The Festival," as though everybody who's reading the text, when we get to "The Festival," would just know. In the days of Solomon, in the days of Ezekiel, they know, "Oh, we're talking about *that* one. We're talking about the Feast of Sukkot—the Feast of Tabernacles." That was *the* festival. So this is how she begins her presentation—the issue. It's the *amount* therefore of the sacrifices.

Then she's going to zero in on the number 70 and then this reference to *the* festival. Everybody knew that this was the big one that had special significance.

Now, before we get too lost in this, we need to talk about what this festival is about? What's the meaning of the festival? This is where I'm going to draw on the website www.JewFAQ.org. You just go to that site and look up Sukkot or Tabernacles or something like that, or even "holidays" and you'll find this. As far as the meaning of the biblical festival, this is right from that website:

The Festival of Sukkot (Lev 23) begins on Tishri 15, the fifth day after Yom Kippur [Day of Atonement]. It is quite a drastic transition, from one of the most solemn holidays [Yom Kippur] in our year to one of the most joyous.

Sukkot has a dual significance: historical and agricultural. Historically, Sukkot commemorates the forty-year period during which the children of Israel were wandering in the desert, living in temporary shelters. Agriculturally, Sukkot is a harvest festival and is sometimes referred to as Chag Ha-Asif, the Festival of Ingathering.

The word "Sukkot" means "booths," [English Bibles will often have "Tabernacles"] and refers to the temporary dwellings that we are commanded to live in during this holiday in memory of the period of wandering.

The name of the holiday is frequently translated "Feast of Tabernacles," which, like many translations of Jewish terms, isn't very useful. This translation is particularly misleading, because the word "tabernacle" in the Bible refers to the portable Sanctuary in the desert, a precursor to the Temple, called in Hebrew "*mishkan*." The Hebrew word "*sukkah*" (plural: "sukkot") refers to the temporary booths that people lived in, not to the Tabernacle.

Sukkot lasts for seven days.

Now that is drawn from the www.JewFAQ.org website. This is about what the festival is. Another little rabbit trail... Tishri 15—that date—was noted in what I just read. Tishri, of course, was the first month of the civil year. Tishri 1 is Rosh Hashanah of the civil year. It was also the yearly inauguration of kingly reigns in ancient Judah (the southern kingdom). Tishri is usually in September or October on the Gregorian calendar. That's why this is associated with ingathering—the harvest. On the ecclesiastical calendar, Tishri is the 7th month. So we have this little reference to Tishri. If you're familiar with some of the other things we've done about calendar, you probably were alerted—your mind was pricked—when you heard, "Tishri." This is in the same month... For our considerations, the importance of this is going to have to do with the fact that it follows the Day of Atonement. It's this festival that commemorates the deliverance or the successful

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traversing of the wilderness—deliverance from the wilderness and being able to successfully navigate that journey and wind up in the Promised Land. So now back to our fundamental question that prompted the whole topic: Why the 70 bulls? This is where we want to camp on for the rest of the episode primarily. We will have a link to Ayali-Darshan's shorter version on our episode page. This is drawn from her scholarly journal article published in *Vetus Testamentum* in 2015. From her online article, she writes this:

While the suggestion that Sukkot was the autumnal **New Year** festival [MH: think of that in the civil calendar... this is Tishri, the beginning of the year] may explain the double number of rams and lambs offered in relation to other festivals...

So she's conceding that maybe it was a big deal because it was the new year thing. But she adds:

It does not explain the additional sacrificing of seventy bulls.

The number to her is significant, and I would agree. The number is significant.

The rabbinic tradition, the first to note explicitly that the number of offerings was seventy, links the seventy offerings offered at Sukkot with the seventy nations (tractate Sukkah 55b):

You actually have this link created. One of the rabbis (this is *Tractate Sukkah* 55B):

R. [Elazar] stated: "To what do those seventy bullocks [that were offered during the seven days of the Festival] correspond? To the seventy nations..."

You actually have that in rabbinical writings. Some rabbi noticed the number—did the counting, did the math, saw the 70 and wanted to come up with an explanation for that and actually proposed that it had something to do with the 70 nations. But that's kind of interesting. Just to go on a little rabbit trail here... Because if you remember from reading *Unseen Realm* or maybe some of you have read my article "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God" published in Dallas Seminary's journal in about 2001, or whenever that was. There's this whole issue of how the Masoretic Text (the traditional Hebrew text) gets rid of the reference to the Sons of God there. But here you have some sense in this rabbinical writing that this must have something to do with the 70 nations. And what Ayali-Darshan is going to do is say. "Yes, we agree with that, and the number 70 is significant because it's not only 70 nations, but you have the 70 Sons of El from Ugarit—the number of the Sons of God." So you have a little bit of a vestige of this worldview even in the rabbinic writings—the rabbinic selection—which I find kind of interesting, that some of it survives despite the

alteration of the Hebrew text in the Masoretic Text tradition. Now Ayali-Darshan adds in her journal article the following. She says:

Rather surprisingly, modern commentators tend to ignore the issue.

[Laughs] Yeah. We've found that in a number of cases. When you get into the old, ancient Near Eastern Israelite worldview... yeah, lots of commentators just ignore this. And I think she's trying to be fair here, but I'd go further and say a lot of them just aren't even thinking about it—it's just not on their radar. Well, it's on *her* radar, and it's certainly on our radar. So she's well aware of it. What she's going to do... What she *does* do (and you can get the shorter version for free) is she will apply this to the 70 nations, and not only the nations, but the 70 gods over those nations. And her view is that the Israelites once a year actually offered sacrifices *to* these other gods. That's the part I'm going to disagree with. I think that there's something else going on here.

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Now, in his Numbers commentary, Milgrom cites the Midrash in *Numbers Rabba* (this is another Jewish text that's extrabiblical rabbinic material, loosely called). Milgrom cites the Midrash in *Numbers Rabba* from what is presumably his own explanation (and if you read his commentary, it sounds like this is where he's at, too), that this tradition relates the 70 bulls to an atonement offering for the 70 nations of the world. Well, that's a little bit different than saying that the Israelites are offering sacrifices *to* foreign gods in some sort of vestige of polytheism. Milgrom connects this with some kind of atonement offering for the *nations* of the world. Now here's the selection that Milgrom cites. I'm going to read it to you. This is from Milgrom's commentary, and he has content from this rabbinic material in his commentary. So I'm going to read you his commentary selection. He says:

You find that on Sukkot, Israel offers to Him [God] seventy bulls as an atonement for the seventy nations. Israel says: "Sovereign of the worlds! Behold, we offer for them seventy bulls and they ought to love us, yet they hate us! As it says, 'In return for my love they are my adversaries'" (Ps. 109:4).

So the rabbi Milgrom was quoting quotes the Old Testament and says that Israel was offering these bulls for the 70 nations for the atonement. Because remember, Sukkot comes right on the heels of the Day of Atonement. So you have a Jewish writer saying, "This is atonement for the nations, and they ought to love us for doing this, but they hate us." Then he quotes Psalm 109:4:

⁴In return for my love they are my adversaries...

Now continuing with Milgrom, he says... he's continuing with the quotation:

The Holy One Blessed Be He, in consequence, said to them: “Now, therefore, offer a sacrifice on your own behalf: ‘On the eighth day ... one bull’” (Num 29:35–36). This may be compared to the case of a king who made a banquet for seven days and invited all the people in the province during the seven days of the feast. When the seven days of the feast were over he said to his friend: “We have already done our duty to all the people of the province, let us now make shift, you and I, with whatever you can find—a pound of meat, or of fish, or vegetables.” In like manner the Holy One Blessed Be He said to Israel: “‘On the eighth day, you shall hold a solemn gathering’; make shift with whatever you can find; with ‘one bull ...’”

Now you have Milgrom mouthing the words of this source. It’s actually really drawn from the source—the Numbers Rabbah source—and Milgrom quotes this to sort of say, “This is what I think it’s about. It has something to do with offering atonement for the nations. And the nations could care less. They hate the God of Israel anyway.” Now Ayali-Darshan does not go that direction. She’s frankly unsatisfied with that interpretation. And she notes that in her article, in the footnotes, and she goes through a couple of other options that honestly (and this is me talking) are a bit more contrived, and she doesn’t like any of them. So she’s going to go on and offer her own perspective here. And it’s kind of an interesting parallel. She goes on to cite a ritual text from Emar (just think ancient Syria, that part of the world). This is Emar 6 and then line 373. So she cites this text from Emar as providing a better context and explanation. Now if you had her article, she summarized the text on pages 5-6. She says a little bit about it in her online summary of her article. I’m just going to summarize it here. I’m not going to go read all the details of this particular text. So here are the high points.

- The text—this Emar text—is about something called the *zukru* festival. It’s celebrated in two versions according to other records that are from Emar. It can be annually celebrated, and it’s also celebrated in a seven-year cycle.
- On both occasions that it was celebrated, you had it go for seven days (so there’s sort of a match to Sukkot), and it begins on the 15th of the month (that’s another match to Sukkot)—15 Tishri.
- The seventh-year festival is elaborated in much more detail. It was celebrated in Emar on the first month of the year, called in Sumerian, the SAG.MU, namely the head of the year—first of the year. On the first day of the festival, when the moon is full, the god Dagan, who is the supreme god of Syria, and all the other gods in the pantheon were taken outside the temple. They take their cult objects—their statues or whatever—they take it outside the temple and the city in the presence of the citizens to a shrine of stones called *sikkānu*. This cultic object also known in other Syrian cities such as Ugarit and Mari—both cities in ancient Syria. This

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object is best described as a *betyl* stela—a standing stone anointed with oil and blood.

- The 70 lambs were then sacrificed to each of the 70 gods of Emar.
- At the culmination of the ceremony, all the gods and citizens returned to the city. On the seventh and final day, Dagan and all the gods of Emar were brought out to the *sikkānu* where a similar ceremony was performed. Over the course of the seven days of the festival, numerous offerings (more than any made in any of the other documented festivals of Emar) were given to all the gods, attesting to the significance of this feast in the city's religious calendar.

Now that's a summary drawn from the work of Ayali-Darshan here. Now on a side note, in her article, she makes a comment about 70 patron gods that I think she gets wrong. The gods of these nations were not given to protect the nations. This is something she goes off on. The biblical text never says that. Later Second Temple texts have that idea, but that's not the point. They were essentially placeholders, they weren't protectors. What are they protecting anybody from? The other God—the God of Israel? It just doesn't make any sense. It's not what the text says. That's a little bit of a rabbit trail. You can see generally that there's some similarity here to what's going on this Emar text and this ancient Syrian festival and biblical stuff.

Now let me just stop here and say Emar was a city in ancient Syria. One of its neighbors, also in ancient Syria, was Ugarit. Ugarit is where you have the 70 sons of El and all that language that we have noted both in *Unseen Realm* and in podcast episodes and in other material that I've written either online or in books. And lots of other people have noted it, too. And there's this relationship between what's going on in Ugaritic and Ugarit and in this case, we bring Emar into the picture and biblical stuff. And we've talked about this before and others have, as well—that the biblical writers are drawing on some of this stuff to make their own theological case for the God of Israel being in control of the nations and assigning the other gods. You never have in the Bible God fathering these other gods with a consort—a goddess—or anything like that. You don't have that. So there are some clear differences. But there are these theological touchpoints, and the biblical writers are going to touch base with that material, both in terms of a common idea (that there's Israel and then there's these other nations that God abandoned—disinherited—because of the sin at Babel) and they're just placeholders now, and then they become corrupt (Psalm 82, Isaiah 34), they're going to be judged, and all that stuff that we've covered a lot on this podcast before.

So there are going to be these common touchpoints, but there's a theological trajectory that the biblical writers take with that material that is quite different from

anything you'd see at Ugarit and that is quite different from religion in ancient Syria—their theological worldview. They do this because this material was familiar to Israelites. Syria is next door. Baal and other gods associated with Ugarit and the Syrian pantheon are the chief competitors to the worship of Yahweh. The prophets have their hands full with this stuff all the time. So it's very understandable that they're going to be referencing this material both in a positive and a negative way. Positively, like, "Okay, we've got this shared worldview—this shared idea—but these are not other gods to worship. They are underlings. They were actually assigned as a punishment to the nations. This isn't at the level of the Most High"—all that kind of talk. So there's a reason for the commonalities but we want to not miss the messaging that's different—the messaging that the biblical writers have that goes with this. And I think that's kind of what Ayali-Darshan does. She misses an opportunity to look at some specific messaging that Milgrom actually is going to bring up, and she doesn't talk about it in her article. She either misses or she sidesteps or she doesn't think it's important if she does notice it. And I'm going to follow a different trajectory with all this. What she does, though, is she takes this material that we've just summarized and she says this. Here's from her conclusion on page 9 of her published article. She writes:

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In light of the Emarite custom, I would like to propose that the law in Numbers 29 prescribing the offering of seventy bulls during Sukkot—which has no parallel in any other Israelite festival—reflects the old Syrian custom of offering seventy sacrifices to the seventy gods (i.e., the whole pantheon) at the grand festival celebrated in the month of the New Year. Over time, the polytheistic traces of this ancient custom disappeared from the Priestly law, and the autumnal New Year festival in the Pentateuchal calendar also lost its significance. The seventy sacrifices, however, have been preserved in the text [in the book of Numbers], a sole remnant of the ancient local tradition of sacrificing seventy offerings to the seventy gods at the New Year festival.

So that's her conclusion—where she winds up with this. Now I don't find that conclusion very persuasive. It's really based on a single presumption, and that is that the offerings of these bulls are *for* or *to* the nations and therefore, logically, their gods. That isn't what the text ever says. Numbers 29 never actually says that and neither does any other text, because this is the only place you're going to find this. It's unique to the festivals. The text never says that. The text doesn't suggest that the nations and their gods are the objects of these sacrifices. Now the rabbinic Midrash that gets quoted is what it is, but that's not the biblical text, and it's made up. It's an effort to do something with the passage to give it meaning—to interpret it. I think Ayali-Darshan is allowing that Midrash with its idea that these are sacrifices *to* or *for* the nations and their gods (these other 70)... I think she's allowing that to have a bit too much influence on her reading of what's going on here. So I have a different proposal.

Now a couple of things here before I get to where I land. We have the number 70. Seventy speaks to the totality of the pantheon. Everybody agrees on this point, and it even was referenced in Ayali-Darshan's summary that we just gave. Seventy refers to the totality of the pantheon—all the other gods.

I want to land here just for a minute because I get this question a lot: "What about the other nations that aren't in the Bible? Do they have other gods over them? Did they get assigned? What about Australia and China, and all these places that aren't mentioned in the Bible?" Seventy is about totality. The whole point of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview is that any place that isn't Israel was disinherited by God. It's not God's land—it's not the Promised Land—it's not the land that he chose for himself or his people. That means every other place is under the dominion of something else. So it doesn't matter if you have a nation that isn't listed in the 70 in Genesis 10. The whole point of it is totality. So the answer is, "Yeah, all of those other nations are not Yahweh's. He has disinherited them from his loving covenantal relationship. It's Israel and everybody else." So I get that question a lot and I think we need to remember that 70 is about the totality here. And in Genesis 10, it is the totality. If you count the nations, that's what you get. And if you use the Septuagint, you get 72, which is why in the New Testament, when Jesus sends out 70 or 72, it just depends on which text the New Testament translator is giving preference to—the Masoretic text or the Septuagint. It refers to the same place: Genesis 10, the Table of Nations.

Another note... the festival. Milgrom says, "It focuses on man's need and desire to give thanks to God for the year's harvest." Fair enough, but what does it commemorate? This, I think, is the main point. This is the main point that I'm going to follow that gets lost here. We've got Ayali-Darshan zeroing in on the 70 and saying, "This is a polytheistic reflex—a polytheistic message." And then she allows the Midrash to influence her too much. She allows the rabbinic idea that these offerings were *to* or *for* the other nations and their gods, I think, to have too much weight. Milgrom has this idea of atonement—that the sacrifices are to atone for the other nations. Neither of them really focus on what in the world Sukkot commemorates. It's not just about agriculture, remember? Even Ayali-Darshan... I think it was her. No, it was the JewFAQ. It has two focuses: historical and agricultural. Agriculturally, yeah, it's about "God meets our needs. We have a harvest." Good. Fair enough. But what does it commemorate historically? This is lost in both Ayali-Darshan's take and Milgrom's take. Sukkot has this dual significance. Let's not focus only on the agriculture. Historically, it commemorates... This is back to JewFAQ.org, just going to quote it again.

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Historically, Sukkot commemorates the forty-year period during which the children of Israel were wandering in the desert, living in temporary shelters.

What does the desert symbolize in biblical thinking? And this is also recalling the Day of Atonement. Remember the Day of Atonement has this wilderness theme

in it, too. And the Day of Atonement, which is linked to this festival as well, has the goat for Azazel sent out into the wilderness. Why? It's not a sacrifice *to* Azazel. You can read about this in *Unseen Realm*. I'm not going to rehearse all the content there. It's because the wilderness is the place, geographically... As they're wandering through the desert, where is the presence of God among his people? It's in the camp. It's in the tabernacle. The camp becomes holy ground, where the presence of God is, and the people encamped around it. Everywhere else out there in the wilderness, is under dominion of hostile gods because of the punishment of Deuteronomy 32. The wilderness is where sin belongs because that land—that territory—is under the dominion of entities that are hostile to Yahweh and his people. Because of their punishment, they become corrupt (Deuteronomy 32:17). They seduced the Israelites into sacrificing to them. This is all old *Unseen Realm* turf. If you haven't read the book, then you need to go back and do that, or you can watch the videos here on the podcast site for where to begin. Just click on that tab and you'll know what we're talking about here.

The wilderness is where sin belongs. It was associated with ground under dominion of other gods. It was a fearful place. It was associated with death. It's the place where you could find gateways to the netherworld, like in Bashan—Ashtoreth and Edrei in texts that were external to the Bible... the whole gates of hell thing. This is where you could go to these places; these are places you could go if you wanted to enter in to the netherworld, the underworld, the realm of the dead, the scary place, the place where the Rephaim spirits lived. Bashan was Rephaim territory. All these ideas are part of this matrix that get associated with the wilderness. And Israel has to trek through all of this turf and they're actually punished to wander around in it for 40 years so they can see that God protects them and sustains them while they're surrounded by enemies—surrounded by cosmic, spiritual enemies. You want to know what spiritual warfare is? This was it. They're trusting God to provide for them while they're in the worst possible position they could be in, and *that* is what Sukkot is about—their deliverance from this situation. Wilderness is the place of chaos and death and hostility. It is unholy ground. And Sukkot... Five days after the Day of Atonement, you have Sukkot, which celebrates the deliverance from this place—from these entities, from these supernatural forces that want death and destruction and chaos for Israel. That's what Sukkot is about. So why in the world would they offer 70 bulls *to* these other entities? They don't need to do that. They were just delivered! They don't just turn around and say, "Oh, we'd better make those entities happy now." No! The entities *lost*. The entities were held at bay. They could not defeat the God of Israel and harm Israel. There's no need to placate them now. You don't placate a defeated enemy. It just doesn't make sense. So I think it's a wrong trajectory. Now back to Milgrom. Milgrom writes in his commentary... This is page 247. He says:

Rabbinic tradition may be correct in stating that the total of seventy bulls represents all the nations of the world, assumed to number seventy. This festival,

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focusing on man's need and desire to give thanks to God for the year's harvest, is of universal appeal.

I would add that's not all it's for. It's not just agricultural, Dr. Milgrom. It's more. It's about celebrating deliverance from these supernatural forces. Back to Milgrom... this is an important observation he makes:

It is small wonder that Zechariah prophesied that Sukkot would become a universally observed festival (Zech. 14:16) and that the Pilgrims at Plymouth modeled the thanksgiving celebration for their first harvest on the biblical paradigm.

This is where we get Thanksgiving, by the way—this whole idea that pilgrims actually modeled it after this particular feast. So yeah, we'll give you that it's about harvest, but even the pilgrims it seems could recognize deliverance. It's not just about having enough food. It's about deliverance. And the observation in Zechariah 14 is the one I want to key on. Zechariah prophesies that *this* festival—this particular festival—would become a universally observed festival. So how about this interpretation: The 70 bulls are offered to commemorate deliverance from the totality of the gods hostile to Israel. It's an expression of joy, not to placate other gods or to kiss up to them. It's not to ask Yahweh to show favor in some act of common grace to those nations and their gods. Rather, it is to thank Yahweh for deliverance from those gods during the wilderness wanderings. Honestly, it just doesn't seem too complicated to me. Now Zechariah 14:16 is interesting if you take that view. How does the view of Ayali-Darshan make sense of *that* passage—of the Zechariah 14:16 passage? We might as well go to Zechariah 14 and just read that.

By the way, does Zechariah 14 ring a bell? I'm going to read the whole thing, and you'll see where verse 16 comes in—the whole thing about the feast of Sukkot. Ayali-Darshan's interpretation just doesn't make sense in light of this passage in Zechariah. In fact, it robs it of some real significance here. So here's Zechariah 14:

Behold, a day is coming for the LORD, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. ² For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. ³ Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives...

That's the idea that is quoted in Acts 1, when Jesus ascends, by the way:

¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” ¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet...

That’s where they are—They’re on the Mount of Olives! So back to Zechariah 14:

³Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. ⁴On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward. ⁵And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

This and what follows is the sourcing in Revelation for Armageddon. It’s about the transformation of the cosmos and the restoration of the Lord’s rule in these awful circumstances. Zechariah 14:

⁶On that day there shall be no light, cold, or frost. ⁷And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.

⁸On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter.

It’s this transformation of the cosmos.

40:00

⁹And the LORD will be king over all the earth.

There’s the restoration of the Lord’s rule.

On that day the LORD will be one and his name one.

¹⁰The whole land shall be turned into a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem shall remain aloft on its site from the Gate of Benjamin to the place of the former gate, to the Corner Gate, and from the Tower of Hananel to the king's winepresses. ¹¹And it shall be inhabited, for there shall never again be a decree of utter destruction. Jerusalem shall dwell in security.

¹²And this shall be the plague with which the LORD will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths.

¹³And on that day a great panic from the LORD shall fall on them, so that each will seize the hand of another, and the hand of the one will be raised against the hand of the other. ¹⁴Even Judah will fight at Jerusalem. And the wealth of all the surrounding nations shall be collected, gold, silver, and garments in great abundance. ¹⁵And a plague like this plague shall fall on the horses, the mules, the camels, the donkeys, and whatever beasts may be in those camps.

What's the point? The point is that on that day when the Lord returns, there will be complete victory and transformation of the cosmos, and then we read verse 16:

¹⁶Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths [Sukkot].

The point is the remnant of the nations *themselves* will keep the feast of Sukkot. This is the feast that commemorates Yahweh's deliverance of his people *from them*—from those hostile nations—and the gods that rule over them. The nations are forced... The survivors are in a situation where *they* turn and celebrate Israel's deliverance *from them*. There's a couple of ways you could read this, and part of this depends how you think about eschatology, and really, more fundamentally, how you think about the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. There we go again—we keep coming back to that issue. I'm going to read a little bit from Mark Boda's commentary on Zechariah here. He writes this, just to help us get the flavoring here:

While Zechariah 14:9 depicted Yahweh's kingship over all the land of Judah (see above), 14:16 makes it clear that this kingship extends over all the earth. As noted

above (14:9), kingship is directly linked to victory in war, and so the focus on kingship in 14:16 is appropriate following the depiction of Yahweh's total annihilation of the armies which had attacked Jerusalem (14:12–15). Yahweh's victory establishes him as an emperor over a large territory who receives now obeisance and tribute, expressed and delivered by yearly attendance at the *Feast of Tabernacles*. This connection between kingship and victory is made clear in the title and name of Yahweh cited in both 14:16 and 14:17: *the King, Yahweh of hosts*, the latter referring to his role as Divine Warrior at the head of a mighty heavenly army.

This is the passage that's quoted in the Armageddon section, and also, I think, alluded to in the Revelation 20 section of the book of Revelation. So what's my point in the Zechariah rabbit trail? Rather than Sukkot being a vestige of polytheism (offering 70 bulls to the gods of the nations, or for their behalf, or to sort of help them out, to chum up to them), the 70 symbolizes deliverance from the gods of the nations by Yahweh. Why 70 bulls? Because Yahweh delivered Israel from *every other god*. He delivered them from the *totality* of the other gods and their nations. It has nothing to do with sacrificing *to* those gods, and if it ever did in the mind of some Israelite somewhere at some point in time, the biblical text (the worldview expressed in the biblical text as we have it) sets that record straight. This is deliverance from the wilderness—the totality of turf that is not Yahweh's turf. God delivers his people from the totality of every supernatural power. That's what it's about. I don't think it's really that complicated.

45:00

Zechariah 14:16 bolsters this because Sukkot is the festival in which the people of the nations who have been enemies of Yahweh will be required to celebrate. It will be a gesture of submission. This makes better sense if the original offering of the 70 bulls was about deliverance from the nations. At the Day of the Lord, the nations will have been defeated, and any remnant that survives Yahweh's judgment—anybody who's allowed to live in the New Jerusalem... catch that idea. Anybody who's allowed to live in the New Jerusalem will also thank Yahweh for his victory—the victory of the Messiah—because it is that victory that transformed the cosmos that makes the world new and that takes us back to Eden.

Now, I know some listeners just can't divorce the words of Zechariah 14 from a particular (or a few particular) popular eschatological schemes. But I'm going to suggest that to understand it abstractly like this is to make sense of it. You can't literalize everything here, because items in Zechariah 14 make no literal sense after the second coming. Just read the rest of the passage. So I would say, try to think a little bit more abstractly. Try to think more like (I hate to say it) an Israelite, more like one of the biblical writers. Why are there some Gentiles who are still around in the New Earth—in the New Jerusalem—that will celebrate the feast of Sukkot as both a gesture of Yahweh's victory over their gods—over the gods who had enslaved them? The answer is because they're part of the remnant.

They're part of the people of God. The remnant of the nations after the cross looks different than they did before the cross. And that's okay. The end of Zechariah is transformed in terms of its fulfillment and meaning, I would say, just like Amos 9:11-12 was. And I don't want to rabbit-trail into that, but if you remember... I think we did a podcast episode on this, or at least it's been part of a Q&A. Amos 9:11-12 is the one that says this:

**¹¹“In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old...”**

Now you think that refers to a new building or a temple, or something like that, but it doesn't. It doesn't, and we know that because of the way its quoted in Acts 15. The next verse:

**¹¹“In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen...”**

Why is God going to raise up the booth of David and repair its breaches and its ruins?

**¹²that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,”
declares the LORD who does this.**

So it sounds like, if you're reading Amos, that God is going to do something that will allow Israel—the national Israel—to possess the remnant of Edom—to conquer its enemies. And we talked about this. Edom was a metaphor for chaos and Babylon because they helped the Babylonians at the destruction of the temple, and we spent two episodes on Obadiah when we got into this whole issue. What does the New Testament do with this passage? It's not about conquest of turf anymore. If you look at it in Acts 15, the booth of David turns out to be Jesus. It's not a building; it's Jesus. And they don't possess the remnant of Edom. *Edom* (*aleph, dalet, mem*) is transformed to *adam*—to mankind. It's about mankind coming to Christ. It's about the Gentiles being included in the family of God under the Messiah. And I'm suggesting that's the way we need to read Zechariah 14 here, too. It really helps. It helps makes sense of it, that you have at the Lord's return... And Revelation quotes Zechariah 14 in relationship to the second coming, victory, halting the forces at Armageddon. I think that passage is mirrored in Revelation 20.

People are going to hear this and go, “Oh, he’s an amillennialist!” No, I’m not an amillennialist or a post-millennialist. I still believe the kingdom comes to Earth. I’m not any system. So throw the systems out. Don’t worry about them. The text is more important than systems. What you have going on, though, is you have the Lord returning at that day—the Day of the Lord. He returns, and the Gentiles who survive this—the vestiges of the other nations who are allowed to live and enter in to a transformed cosmos (a New Eden, a New Heaven, and a New Earth)... of course they’re going to celebrate the Feast of Sukkot. Of course they’re going to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. Why? Because the Feast of Tabernacles commemorates God’s deliverance—his superiority and victory—over all other gods. That’s how it’s supposed to end.

50:00

And if you’re a Gentile—if you’re outside the family of Israel (the physical descendants of Abraham)—you’re included if you align yourself with the God of Israel who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. It’s very coherent and cohesive if we can on one hand not view this through the lens of the rabbis—“Oh, they’re sacrificing to other gods—a vestige of polytheism” or “they’re sacrificing bulls to make God look more favorable on those nations and atone for them in some way” (and the nations hate God, so I don’t know how that works)... “You need a change of heart here.” I don’t know how that works.

So instead of looking at it in that way, why don’t we just take Sukkot for what it is historically, not just agriculturally? Historically, it’s about deliverance from the wilderness, through the wilderness, from the wilderness, and just the realm of death and darkness that was under the dominion of other gods. It doesn’t seem complicated to me. Of course there are 70 because the idea is to commemorate Yahweh’s victory on behalf of his people over the totality of the powers of darkness—every other supernatural being. And when that’s celebrated in the future, at the Lord’s return, of course it makes sense. Of course it makes sense that the Gentiles who are not annihilated survive into the new set of circumstances by going up and worshipping the Lord. That implies a switch of loyalty. Their believing loyalty is now in the God of Israel, and of course they would celebrate the feast of Sukkot in his honor and out of gratitude because look where they are! Look where they are. So the subject is interesting. I hope it’s been interesting for you. But that’s my view. That’s my view of the whole 70 bulls of Sukkot thing. So if you want to read Ayali-Darshan’s article, please do. We’ll have a link to that—the one online, anyway, not her journal article. That’s not freely accessible. And that’s my take on it. I think it’s really a neat part, and a cohesive element—cohesive part—of what we call here on the podcast or the *Unseen Realm* of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. I think it fits in real nicely.

TS: That 70 number is always, coming up, Mike, and also, you know what is 70 this year, don’t you?

MH: Well, it isn’t me. [laughs]

TS: No, the 70th anniversary of what?

MH: Oh, yes, the founding of the state of Israel, yep.

TS: And where will we be?

MH: [laughs] That's a very nice segue...

TS: Where will we be on that day?

MH: We will be in Israel, and as far as I know, there were still five or six openings left, so that might be where you're angling here.

TS: Exactly. We will be in Jerusalem on that exact date.

MH: Nicely done, nicely done. [laughs]

TS: Thank you. Alright. Some other things here... I'm going to switch gears. I noticed we have over 500 ratings on iTunes for the podcast, so thank you for everybody who has done that, and over 200 reviews, so thank y'all for taking the time to do that. And if you haven't done so, we're on Facebook. We've got almost 2000 people on our Naked Bible group having great conversations every day, so go like the Naked Bible Podcast page. Mike has got a public page, so go like his Michael S. Heiser...

MH: We're trying to put our focus there, "Michael S. Heiser."

TS: So go like his page, the Naked Bible Podcast page. We have a Peeranormal page for those that are interested for that, and then also you could join the groups for both of those, so get in there and have some great conversations.

MH: Yep. Subscribe to the newsletter, too. Go to drmsb.com, it's on the right hand side: "Why should I subscribe?" Click on that and it'll tell you.

TS: Sounds good, Mike. With that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast. God Bless.