

Numbers 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 17 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, and get from them staffs, one for each father's house, from all their chiefs according to their father's houses, twelve staffs.

Write each man's name on his staff, and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi, for there shall be one staff for the head of each father's house. Then you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the testimony, where I meet with you.

And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you. Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and all their chiefs gave him staffs, one for each chief, according to their father's houses, twelve staffs.

And the staff of Aaron was among their staffs. And Moses deposited the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the testimony. On the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony, And behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.

Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the people of Israel. And they looked, and each man took his staff. And the Lord said to Moses, Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumbings against me, lest they die.

[1 : 27] Thus did Moses, as the Lord commanded him, so he did. And the people of Israel said to Moses, Behold, we perish. We are undone. We are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord shall die.

Are we all to perish? Numbers chapter 17 continues to deal with the fallout of the rebellion of Korah. The Lord vindicates the authority of Aaron the high priest against all potential challenges, with a great sign, the sign of the budding and blossoming rod.

Gordon Wenham observes that it is a symbolic reenactment of the Korah scene of the previous chapter. The twelve chieftains of the tribes, there is one chief for each tribe, put their names on the staffs.

And it is worth noting that staff and tribe are the same word in the Hebrew. The rod symbolises Aaron and also the tribe of Levi. And it is placed among the other rods, the rods of all the other tribes of Israel.

The rod is placed before the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies by Moses. And Moses returns the next day and Aaron's rod has budded and blossomed and borne almonds.

[2 : 39] Aaron's rod, representing Aaron himself at the head of the Levites, is then placed back before the Ark of the Covenant as a sign to all potential rebels that God has chosen Levi and of Levi he's chosen Aaron as the one to be high priest over his people.

The people's response at this point is to fear. In the previous chapter they've seen the destruction of Korah, Dathan and Abiram and the 250 chiefs. And now God has decisively vindicated Aaron, the one that they were speaking against.

Learning the lessons of these chapters, they realise that they cannot come near to the holy tabernacle of the Lord or they will perish. They need someone else to do that for them. This is a very short chapter, but there are a number of details within it that we should be curious about.

Why the rods? Well, we've seen the rods are connected with the tribes. Staff and tribe is the same word. Why then have the blossoms? And why have almonds?

Why almonds in particular? What are we to make of this detail? I think one clue can be found in Exodus chapter 25, where we're given the instructions for the lampstand.

[3 : 50] Exodus chapter 25 verses 31 to 39. You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be made of hammered work. Its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes and its flowers shall be of one piece with it.

And there shall be six branches going out of its sides. Three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it. Three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower on one branch.

And three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower on the other branch. So for the six branches going out of the lampstand. and on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms with their calyxes and flowers and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand their calyxes and their branches shall be a one piece with it the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold you shall make seven lamps for it and the lamp shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it its tongs and their trades shall be a pure gold it shall be made with all these utensils out of a talent of pure gold the lampstand then is connected with almonds it's also something that gives light and keeps a watch over the table of the presence representing israel and so the connection of the lampstand with the almond and the connection of aaron's rod with the almond suggests that there's associations between the two both of them are to be present in the holy place both of them are to give light to israel and to watch over israel as a nation the lampstand over the bread of the presence which represents israel and aaron over israel itself now the almond is also the watcher tree the word itself is the word for watchman or watcher jeremiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 12 highlights this particular pun and the word of the lord came to me saying jeremiah what do you see and i said i see an almond branch then the lord said to me you have seen well for i am watching over my word to perform it that play on words is the same play on words that i think is going on here the blossoming of aaron's rod with almond blossoms the connection of aaron with almonds is the connection of aaron with the task of the watcher it's the connection of aaron with the task of the lampstand such symbolism of the lampstand can be elaborated even further in zechariah chapter 4 verses 1 to 4 and 10 to 14 and the angel who talked with me came again and woke me like a man who was awakened out of his sleep and he said to me what do you see i said i see and behold a lampstand all of gold with a bowl on the top of it and seven lamps on it with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on top of it and there are two olive trees by it one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left and i said to the angel who talked with me what are these my lord these seven are the eyes of the lord which range through the whole earth then i said to him what are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand and a second time i answered and said to him what are these two branches of the olive trees which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out he said to me do you not know what these are i said no my lord then he said these are the two anointed ones who stand by the lord of the whole earth so what we see here is an association between the anointed ones the ones that are established by god to rule over his people and the lampstand we also see an association of the lampstand with watching with the eyes and i think that can help us further to understand what's going on with the establishment of erin's rod as a blossoming almond and then the connection of that with the lampstand in the holy place there's more to be observed here though in exodus chapter 28 verses 36 to 38 we're told you shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it like the engraving of a signet holy to the lord and you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue it shall be on the front of the turban it shall be on aaron's forehead and aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of israel consecrate as their holy

gifts it shall regularly be on his forehead that they may be accepted before the lord now this may seem to have no connection whatsoever with what we've just read but there is a connection and the connection is found in the fact that the word for plate is the word flower it's the same word that we have here for the blossoms of aaron's rod and in the pentateuch it's the word that is only ever used either in this chapter of the blossoms of aaron's rod or elsewhere of the plate that is on aaron's forehead there's a connection it seems to me the blossom of the rod and the blossom on his forehead they're both statements of his holiness to the lord both statements that god has set him apart as a minister and so the blossoming of his rod is connected with the plate of gold now there's one other thing that could be observed here the description of that plate of gold and the way that it's held on to the turban is held on in a way that reminds us of something we've read about just a couple of chapters earlier it reminds us of the tassels the cords of blue cords of blue that associate

israel with holiness to the lord associate israel with the status that the high priest has in some sense now those cords of blue are called a zitzit and here we have the zitz the connection between these two words i believe explains even further why the rod blossoms as we recognize such connections we should also appreciate that the book of numbers which for many readers is just an assortment of random material that's not held together very strongly is actually a coherent argument that there are deep connections leading us all the way through and as we see these connections we'll be able to trace the way in which later events answer to earlier ones and the ways in which law responds and corresponds to narrative a question to consider where in the new testament do we see a reference to aaron's budding rod