

Numbers 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 4. The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, Take a census of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, by their clans and their fathers' houses, from thirty years old up to fifty years old, all who can come on duty to do the work in the tent of meeting. This is the service of the sons of Kohath in the tent of meeting, the most holy things. When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the veil of the screen, and cover the ark of the testimony with it. Then they shall put on it a covering of goatskin, and spread on top of that a cloth all of blue, and shall put in its poles. And over the table of the bread of the presence they shall spread a cloth of blue, and put on it the plates, the dishes for incense, the bowls and the flagons for the drink offering.

The regular showbread also shall be on it. Then they shall spread over them a cloth of scarlet, and cover the same with a covering of goatskin, and shall put in its poles. And they shall take a cloth of blue, and cover the lampstand for the light, with its lamps, its tongs, its trays, and all the vessels for oil with which it is supplied. And they shall put it with all its utensils in a covering of goatskin, and put it on the carrying frame. And over the golden altar they shall spread a cloth of blue, and cover it with a covering of goatskin, and shall put in its poles.

And they shall take all the vessels of the service that are used in the sanctuary, and put them in a cloth of blue, and cover them with a covering of goatskin, and put them on the carrying frame. And they shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it. And they shall put on it all the utensils of the altar, which are used for the service there, the firepans, the forks, the shovels, and the basins, all the utensils of the altar. And they shall spread on it a covering of goatskin, and shall put in its poles. And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, as the camp sets out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry these. But they must not touch the holy things, lest they die. These are the things of the tent of meeting that the sons of Kohath are to carry. And Eliezer the son of Aaron the priest shall have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering, and the anointing oil with the oversight of the whole tabernacle, and all that is in it, of the sanctuary and its vessels.

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, Let not the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites, but deal thus with them, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things. Aaron and his son shall go in and appoint them each to his task and to his burden. But they shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Take a census of the sons of Gershon also by their fathers' houses and by their clans. From thirty years old up to fifty years old, you shall list them, all who can come to do duty, to do service in the tent of meeting. This is the service of the clans of the Gershonites, in serving and bearing burdens. They shall carry the curtains of the tabernacle and the tent of meeting with its covering, and the covering of goatskin that is on top of it, and the screen for the entrance of the tent of meeting, and the hangings of the court, and the screen for the entrance of the gate of the court that is around the tabernacle and the altar, and their cords and all the equipment for their service, and they shall do all that needs to be done with regard to them. All the service of the sons of the Gershonites shall be at the command of Aaron and his sons, in all that they are to carry and in all that they have to do, and you shall assign to their charge all that they are to carry. This is the service of the clans of the sons of the Gershonites in the tent of meeting, and their guard duty is to be under the direction of

Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest. As for the sons of Morari, you shall list them by their clans and their fathers' houses, from thirty years old up to fifty years old. You shall list them, everyone who can come on duty to do the service of the tent of meeting, and this is what they are charged to carry, as the whole of their service in the tent of meeting, the frames of the tabernacle, with its bars, pillars and bases, and the pillars around the court with their bases, pegs and cords, with all their equipment and all their accessories, and you shall list by name the objects that they are required to carry. This is the service of the clans of the sons of Morari, the whole of their service in the tent of meeting, under the direction of Ithamar, the son of Aaron the priest. And Moses and Aaron, and the chiefs of the congregation, listed the sons of the Kohathites by their clans and their fathers' houses, from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who could come on duty for service in the tent of meeting, and those listed by clans were two thousand seven hundred and fifty.

[4 : 29] This was the list of the clans of the Kohathites, all who served in the tent of meeting, who Moses and Aaron listed according to the commandment of the Lord by Moses. Those listed of the sons of Gershon by their clans and their fathers' houses, from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who could come on duty for service in the tent of meeting, those listed by their clans and their fathers' houses were two thousand six hundred and thirty. This was the list of the clans of the sons of Gershon, all who served in the tent of meeting, who Moses and Aaron listed according to the commandment of the Lord. Those listed of the clans of the sons of Merari, by their clans and their fathers' houses, from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who could come on duty for service in the tent of meeting, those listed by clans were three thousand two hundred. This was the list of the clans of the sons of Merari, who Moses and Aaron listed according to the commandment of the Lord by Moses. All those who were listed of the Levites, who Moses and Aaron and the chiefs of Israel listed by their clans and their fathers' houses, from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who could come to do the service of ministry and the service of bearing burdens in the tent of meeting, those listed were eight thousand five hundred and eighty. According to the commandment of the Lord through Moses they were listed, each one with his task of serving or carrying.

Thus they were listed by him, as the Lord commanded Moses. In Numbers chapter 3 a census was taken of the clans of the Levites, of all the males from one month and older.

In Numbers chapter 4 a second census is taken of the clans of the Levites, this time of those who are of suitable age for service in the things related to the tabernacle, males between the age of thirty and fifty.

Besides the numbering of those suitable for active service in the things related to the tabernacle, this chapter gives us the specific duties of each clan. The Levites were ordered around the tabernacle with the Kohathites at the south, the Merarites at the north, the Gershonites on the west, and Moses and the sons of Aaron on the east. Besides the priests, it seems to be the Kohathites who perform the most important roles within this chapter. They are responsible for and they bear the holiest of the items.

In contrast to the other clans, they also bear the items for which they are responsible. The items of the tabernacle for which the other clans are responsible are borne by oxen. While placed differently around the tabernacle, Moses and Aaron were also descended from Kohath, as we see in 1 Chronicles chapter 6 verses 2 and 3. The Levites were like the roadies for the tabernacle, responsible for packing, transporting, and reassembling the tabernacle. As the sons of Kohath were responsible for the most holy things, they had to take a special care and much of the actual packing was performed by the priests.

[7 : 10] Were the Kohathites to touch the most holy things, they would die. Such warnings concerning the sons of Kohath should be borne in mind when we read about the rebellion of Korah later on in the book of Numbers.

Careful instruction is given for the covering of each of the items of furniture for the tabernacle. We should recognize the similarity between the coverings for these items and the tabernacle itself. Each of the items of furniture of the tabernacle has its own miniature tabernacle.

There are certain ways in which items within the tabernacle are related as microcosms to the macrocosm of the tabernacle itself. We might, for instance, think about the Ark of the Covenant in the most holy place.

The base of that, the Ark itself, represents the land. That's covered by the mercy seat, the firmament. And then above the mercy seat, the Lord is enthroned above the cherubim.

That is, as it were, the most holy place upon the Ark of the Covenant itself. A sort of sanctuary in miniature within the greater sanctuary. Like a smaller Russian doll hidden within a larger one.

[8 : 10] The order of the duties for the packing up and transporting of the tabernacle move from the priests to the sons of Kohath to the sons of Gershon to the sons of Merari, from east to south to west to north of the camps of the Levites.

Eliezer the son of Aaron has particular responsibility for oversight of the house of Kohath, whereas Ithamar the son of Aaron has particular responsibility for oversight of the clans of Merari and Gershon.

The Kohathites are responsible for the Ark of the Covenant, for the veil for the most holy place, for the table of showbread, for the lampstand, for the golden altar, and for the bronze altar in the courtyard.

Perhaps we should assume that the bronze labour was included with the bronze altar, but it's not explicitly mentioned here. The Gershonites are responsible for the various screens and hangings that surround the tabernacle, the actual tent and the hangings surrounding its courtyard.

While they carry the screens for the entrance to the tabernacle courtyard, and for the entrance to the holy place, the veil to the most holy place is carried by the sons of Kohath. Finally, the clan of Merari is responsible for the frames, pillars, and bases, the structures that would bear all the fabrics and hangings, along with the pegs and cords and other things associated with them.

[9 : 22] In Exodus chapter 26 verses 31 to 33, instructions were given for the construction of the veil for the most holy place. And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen.

It shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it. And you shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold and four bases of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the Ark of the Testimony in there within the veil.

And the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy. While attention is given in Exodus to the various fabrics of which the tabernacle should be constructed, in Numbers chapter 4 even more attention seems to be given to this aspect of the tabernacle, with different colours stipulated for the covering of different items.

This suggests that the colours used for the covering of different items is not just a manifestation of glory as such, but has more specific symbolic significance. For some reason it is appropriate the bronze altar be covered with a purple rather than a blue cloth, while the dishes and other items associated with the table of the presence should be covered with the cloth of scarlet.

The instructions are as follows. The Ark of the Covenant needs to be covered with the veil of the screen, with the blue, purple, scarlet and linen veil to the most holy place. After that it should be covered with a goatskin covering, and then a blue cloth.

[10 : 43] The table of the presence is covered with a cloth of blue. Upon that the incense dishes, drink offering flagons and showbread is placed, and then upon that a cloth of scarlet.

On top of all of those items there is a further covering, the covering of goatskin. The lampstand comes next with its tongs, trays and oil vessels, all covered with a cloth of blue, and then put with its utensils in a goatskin covering on a carrying frame.

The golden altar is covered in a cloth of blue, and then covered with goatskin. The vessels of the service of the sanctuary are covered with a cloth of blue, and goatskin. Finally the bronze altar is covered with a purple cloth, its utensils are then placed upon it, and all of that is covered with goatskin.

The items of the holy place are generally covered with a blue cloth, and then a goatskin covering. The Ark of the Covenant is unique in being covered with the veil of the screen, then with a blue cloth on top of the goatskin covering.

The other two items that stand out are the bronze altar, which is covered by a purple cloth beneath its goatskin covering, and then the incense dishes, drink offering flagons and showbread, which are placed upon the table of the presents with its covering of a cloth of blue, and then covered in their turn with a cloth of scarlet.

[11 : 57] When fully packed up, the distinctive item would be the Ark of the Covenant, while the external covering of all the other items was goatskin, its final layer was blue. The Ark of the Covenant would then stand out from the other items.

This was fitting because it was that which led them upon their way, as we see in Numbers chapter 10, verses 33 to 36. So they set out from the mount of the Lord three days' journey.

And the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them. And the cloud of the Lord was over them by day, whenever they set out from the camp. And whenever the Ark set out, Moses said, Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.

And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel. The Ark of the Covenant was unique in having for its inner covering, the veil to the Most Holy Place.

This again was fitting because it was the one item of furniture being carried from the Most Holy Place. All the items of the Holy Place have a blue covering, and then a goatskin covering. And then the bronze altar, the one item of the furniture of the courtyard that's mentioned, has a purple covering beneath the goatskin.

[13 : 05] This suggests that the covering of the items corresponds in some way to their location within the tabernacle itself. The Most Holy Item, the Ark of the Covenant, is covered with the veil to the Most Holy Place.

The items of the Holy Place are covered with blue, and then the bronze altar of the courtyard is covered with purple. The one exception this leaves are the incense dishes, drink offering flagons, and showbread of the table of the Presence.

These items are placed upon the table of the Presence, which has itself already been covered with a cloth of blue. However, they are covered with a cloth of scarlet. Perhaps they are exceptions in that they represent those things that are brought into the Holy Place from without, the drink offerings, the showbread, and the incense.

They do not represent fixed items of the Holy Place, but items that are brought near. Hence their covering is one of scarlet, perhaps representing the covering of blood. Here we need to consider the symbolism of these colours more generally.

We have already noted a correspondence with the situation or location within the tabernacle, and the covering that an item has. We can also consider the costliness of these coverings. Scarlet, blue, and purple were all expensive dyes.

[14 : 14] These were fitting colours for the coverings of a royal tent, which is one way to consider the tabernacle. Besides more conventional or arbitrary associations with specific levels of holiness relative to the tabernacle, should we seek for further symbolic connections to these colours, we could consider some natural possibilities.

First, the colours seem to have some sort of order or priority. Linen connected with white, then scarlet, purple, and blue. White has connotations of purity and cleansing, being without blemish.

Scarlet is connected with blood. Here we might think more generally of the way that blood covers things within the order of the tabernacle. Purple is connected with royalty, and also possibly with smoke, as James Jordan suggests.

Then blue is connected with the sky, with the heavens, and with the firmament more generally. Perhaps we should see a sort of ascension through colours here. The greatest item of all is covered with a covering that has interwoven blue, purple, scarlet, and linen.

A sort of rainbow covering that incorporates within itself all of these different levels of covering. Perhaps there's some connection between the covering of the Ark of the Covenant here, and the way that the throne of the Lord is described as being surrounded by a rainbow in places like Revelation chapter 4 verse 3.

[15 : 30] Besides the duties of the sons of Kohath, Eliezer the son of Aaron the priest has particular responsibility for the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering, and the anointing oil.

Most of these are items that are described in the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle back in Exodus chapter 25 to 31. As Eliezer also has oversight for the whole tabernacle and all within it, he would be the one particularly responsible for overseeing the Kohathites.

In Numbers chapter 7 verses 1 to 9 we read that the chiefs of Israel dedicated to the Lord six wagons and twelve oxen. Of those two wagons and four oxen were given to the sons of Gershon, and four wagons and eight oxen to the sons of Morari.

The sons of Kohath received none. They were responsible to carry the most holy things upon their own shoulders. The special status of these items was seen then in part in the fact that they had human bearers, not just animals.

This also underlines the fact that the heaviest items of the tabernacle, the primary structural elements, were the responsibility of Morari. In association with the tasks of Morari, the instruction is also given that the objects should be listed by name.

[16 : 41] Of the three clans, Morari was the one that faced the greatest danger of leaving some item behind, or failing to account for it. As so many of the items committed to their charge would have been similar or identical to each other, we can imagine that each one of the members of this clan would have a very specific item that they had to pay attention to.

Such a detail is suggested by the final verse of the chapter. According to the commandment of the Lord through Moses they were listed, each one with his task of serving or carrying. A question to consider, where in Scripture do we see a failure to observe these instructions in carrying holy items, leading to tragic consequences?

