

Numbers 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 8 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Take the Levites from among the people of Israel and cleanse them.

Thus you shall do to them to cleanse them. Sprinkle the water of purification upon them, and let them go with a razor over all their body, and wash their clothes, and cleanse themselves.

Then let them take a bull from the herd, and its grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil, and you shall take another bull from the herd for a sin offering. And you shall bring the Levites before the tent of meeting, and assemble the whole congregation of the people of Israel.

When you bring the Levites before the Lord, the people of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites, and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the Lord as a wave offering from the people of Israel, that they may do the service of the Lord.

Then the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls, and you shall offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the Lord, to make atonement for the Levites. And you shall set the Levites before Aaron and his sons, and shall offer them as a wave offering to the Lord.

[1 : 3 0] Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine. And after that the Levites shall go in to serve at the tent of meeting, when you have cleansed them and offered them as a wave offering.

For they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel. Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself. For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast.

On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated them for myself. And I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting, and to make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel, when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary.

Thus did Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the people of Israel to the Levites. According to all that the Lord commanded Moses concerning the Levites, the people of Israel did to them. And the Levites purified themselves from sin and washed their clothes, and Aaron offered them as a wave offering before the Lord, and Aaron made atonement for them to cleanse them.

And after that the Levites went in to do their service in the tent of meeting, before Aaron and his sons, as the Lord had commanded Moses concerning the Levites, so they did to them. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, This applies to the Levites.

[2 : 5 6] From twenty-five years old and upward they shall come to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting, and from the age of fifty years they shall withdraw from the duty of the service, and serve no more.

They minister to their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard, but they shall do no service. Thus shall you do to the Levites in assigning their duties. Numbers chapter 8 begins with the Lord instructing Moses concerning Aaron's service of the lamps.

The book of Numbers intersperses narrative with law, and the law and the narrative are often mutually illuminating, but it's not always clear why they are placed together. It can require a bit of puzzling out on occasions.

The previous chapter lists the offerings at the consecration of the tabernacle. After the tabernacle has been consecrated, the setting up of the lampstand and the rules concerning it follow fairly naturally.

In Exodus chapter 25 verses 31 to 40 we read the rules concerning the lampstand when the instructions for the tabernacle are first given. You shall make a lampstand of pure gold.

[3 : 58] 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 of one piece with it, the whole work of it, a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. You shall make seven lamps for it, and the lamps shall be set up, so as to give light on the space in front of it.

Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold. It shall be made with all these utensils, out of a talent of pure gold. And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

[5 : 07] Further instructions can be found in Exodus chapter 40 verses 24 to 25. He put the lampstand in the tent of meeting, opposite the table on the south side of the tabernacle, and set up the lamps before the Lord, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Presumably this suggests that the light of the lamps was supposed to be casting light onto the table. In Exodus we saw parallels between the lampstand and the priests, as anointed ministers in the tabernacle.

Aaron's entry into the service of the tabernacle would perhaps connect naturally with the service of the lamp in the holy place, which would have been among his chief duties. The Levites were appointed to replace the firstborn of Israel in Numbers chapter 3 verses 11 to 13 and 40 to 51.

And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel, instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine.

On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine. I am the Lord.

[6 : 17] The Levites then seemed to have been set apart to replace the firstborn of the Israelites in Exodus chapter 32, in the aftermath of the golden calf incident, when they stood beside Moses and judged the Israelites on account of their sin.

And the Lord said to Moses, List all the firstborn males of the people of Israel from a month old and upward, taking the number of their names. And you shall take the Levites for me.

I am the Lord, instead of all of the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites, instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the people of Israel. So Moses listed all the firstborn among the people of Israel as the Lord commanded him.

And all the firstborn males, according to the number of names from a month old and upward, as listed, were 22,273. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Take the Levites instead of all of the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle.

The Levites shall be mine. I am the Lord. And as the redemption prize for the 273 of the firstborn of the people of Israel, over and above the number of the male Levites, you shall take five shekels per head.

[7 : 28] You shall take them according to the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel of twenty geras, and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption prize for those who are over. So Moses took the redemption money for those who are over and above those redeemed by the Levites.

From the firstborn of the people of Israel he took the money, 1,365 shekels by the shekel of the sanctuary. And Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons, according to the word of the Lord.

As the Lord commanded Moses. The Levites weren't like the priests. They did not perform the service of the altar, and were not permitted to enter into the tabernacle. They were appointed to guard and to serve.

These were duties of the priests and high priest as well, but in a different realm and to a greater degree. All of these things look back to the Garden of Eden, where Adam was placed in the Garden to keep and to serve the Garden, to guard it and to serve it and minister within it.

In Numbers chapter 3 verses 5 to 10, we have a description of their dedication. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Bring the tribe of Levi near and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him.

[8 : 38] They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle.

And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons. They are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.

We should remember the way that the Levites functioned as zealous military guardians of Israel's holiness in Exodus chapter 32. They are now appointed for this purpose more generally.

The firstborn is the firstfruits of strength, and the Levites are, as it were, the standing army of the Lord around his palace tent, while the rest of the Lord's host, the other tribes, are arrayed around it by their tribes.

They were purified and appointed for service, if they were in the age range of those who would work, 25 to 50, as we see at the end of the chapter. However, they weren't ordained like the priests, nor were they wholly in the same way as the priests.

[9 : 43] After the initial setting apart of the Levites for a covering of the people of Israel, there wouldn't be any ceremony, so much as a ritual process that all of the Levites would have to undergo.

The water of purification here is presumably the water described in chapter 19. The Levites aren't merely being appointed for this service. They are also taking the place of the firstborn.

They are offered as a wave offering, with representatives of the whole congregation presenting them as their substitutes. The firstborn had to be sacrificed to the Lord, as we see in Exodus chapter 13.

But the Levites take their place, making covering or atonement for them. We can see that the sacrifices make covering and atonement for the Levites themselves.

They protect the people from the plague, as we saw in the census tax of Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16. When people come before the Lord, are brought to his attention, then there is the threat of the plague, if they do not bring some sort of ransom or redemption or some covering for themselves.

[10:48] And so there is a need for covering, and the Levites provide that for the rest of Israel. They're offered by the Israelites, and they're also offered by the Lord to Aaron. Maybe we can see some sort of similarity here, with Eve being brought near to Adam to help him in the realm of the garden.

Now there are obviously many dissimilarities between these two things, but a similarity is quite possible. This is just before the second Passover, so the dedication of the Levites as the replacement for the firstborn is very fitting and timely in this particular context.

A question to consider, what about the tribe of Levites sets it apart from the other tribes to this point? Why might they be particularly apt for this particular calling?