

Numbers 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 3. These are the generations of Aaron and Moses at the time when the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. These are the names of the sons of Aaron, Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he ordained to serve as priests. But Nadab and Abihu died before the Lord when they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children. So Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests in the lifetime of Aaron their father. 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.

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. 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. And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying, List the sons of Levi by fathers' houses and by clans. Every male from a month old and upward you shall list. So Moses listed them according to the word of the Lord, as he was commanded. And these were the sons of Levi by their names, Gershon and Kohath and Morari.

And these are the names of the sons of Gershon by their camps, Libni and Shimei, and the sons of Kohath by their clans, Amram, Ishar, Hebron, and Uzziel, and the sons of Morari by their clans, Malai and Mushai. These are the clans of the Levites by their fathers' houses. To Gershon belonged the clan of the Libnites and the clan of the Shimeites. These were the clans of the Gershonites.

Their listing, according to the number of all the males from a month old and upward, was 7,500. The clans of the Gershonites were to camp behind the tabernacle on the west, with Eliasav the son of Lael as chief of the father's house of the Gershonites.

[2 : 1 9] And the guard duty of the sons of Gershon in the tent of meeting involved the tabernacle, the tent with its covering, the screen for the entrance of the tent of meeting, the hangings of the court, the screen for the door of the court that is around the tabernacle and the altar, and its cords, all the service connected with these.

To Kohath belonged the clan of the Amorites, and the clan of the Isharites, and the clan of the Hebronites, and the clan of the Uzzielites. These are the clans of the Kohathites. According to the number of all the males from a month old and upward, there were 8,600 keeping guard over the sanctuary. The clans of the sons of Kohath were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle, with Eliasav the son of Uzziel as chief of the father's house of the clans of the Kohathites. And their guard duty involved the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the vessels of the sanctuary with which the priests minister, and the screen, all the service connected with these. And Eliezer the son of Aaron the priest was to be chief over the chiefs of the Levites, and to have oversight of those who kept guard over the sanctuary. To Morari belonged the clans of the Malites and the clans of the Mushites. These are the clans of Morari. Their listing, according to the number of all the males from a month old and upward, was 6,200. And the chief of the father's house of the clans of Morari were Zuriel, the son of Abihel. They were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle, and the appointed guard duty of the sons of Morari involved the frames of the tabernacle, the bars, the pillars, the bases, and all their accessories, all the service connected with these.

Also the pillars around the court were their bases and pegs and cords. Those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tent of meeting toward the sunrise, were Moses and Aaron and his sons, guarding the sanctuary itself, to protect the people of Israel, and any outsider who came near was to be put to death. All those listed among the Levites, who Moses and Aaron listed at the commandment of the Lord by clans, all the males from a month old and upward, were 22,000. 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 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 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 price 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. You shall take them according to the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel of 20 geros, and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are over.

So Moses took the redemption money from 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. Numbers chapter 3 begins with an expression that might surprise us.

These are the generations of Aaron and Moses at the time when the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. The expression is surprising for a number of reasons. First of all, while this is a common expression that structures the book of Genesis, it's hardly ever found outside of it, only on a couple of occasions, the end of Ruth being another instance. Second, it seems strange to refer to the generations of Aaron and Moses, when none of Moses' descendants are actually mentioned. Third, why relate this to the time when the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai? Perhaps we are supposed to see Moses as becoming like a spiritual father to the sons of Aaron. Previously, Moses was told that he would be like God to Aaron.

[6 : 21] The Lord commands Moses, and then Moses commands Aaron. In the ordination ritual recorded in Leviticus chapters 8 and 9, Moses is the one who officiates, and through his officiation, Aaron and his sons become priests. Perhaps we could understand this ordination ceremony as a sort of coming to birth, with Moses, who first plays the role of the priest, becoming like their father. Unfortunately, the two elder sons of Aaron offered strange fire to the Lord, and fire came out from the Lord's presence and consumed them.

Eliezer and Ithamar will later take the place of Nadab and Abihu. The priesthood may have been born, but the priests need people to assist them. It's not good that they should be alone, and so in an action somewhat analogous to the way that the Lord brought the woman to the man in the original creation, so that he would not be alone in his task in the garden, the Lord brings the Levites to Aaron and his sons. The Levites will assist Aaron and his sons in their task. Levi was a tribe known for zeal.

We first witness the zeal of Levi as he joins Simeon his brother to avenge the abduction of Dinah by Shechem. We read of his bloody actions in Genesis chapter 34, events recalled in chapter 49, where Jacob declares judgment upon Levi and Simeon on account of their actions. Later, however, the zeal of Levi is expressed in a far more positive way. At the time of Israel's sin with the golden calf, we read in Exodus chapter 32 verses 25 to 29, and when Moses saw that the people had broken loose, for Aaron had let them break loose to the derision of their enemies, then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me. And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, Thus says the Lord God of Israel, Put your sword on your side, each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor. And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. And Moses said, Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.

In the final plague upon Egypt in the Exodus and in the Passover, the Lord had consecrated the firstborn of Israel to himself. In Exodus chapter 4 verses 22 to 23, the Lord declares, Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, Let my son go that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.

Themes of birth pervade the story of the Exodus. The story begins with Israel groaning for deliverance in the womb of Egypt. There are stories of women giving birth, of the midwives, of Jochebed and Moses and his deliverance as an infant. When Israel leaves Egypt, they leave through bloody doors.

[9 : 12] Laws concerning the first child to open the womb are given in chapter 13 of the book. Right at the moment of their leaving Egypt. And then in chapter 14, waters are broken apart. They pass through a narrow passage from darkness to light and become a new people on the other side.

At the time of the Exodus, the Lord had dedicated the firstborn sons of Israel to himself, as the firstborn sons of Israel represented the nation's status before him. Israel was his firstborn son, and so the firstborn sons of Israel had to be dedicated to him.

Emmanuel Shalev helpfully discusses what the firstborn son is supposed to do. The firstborn son, among other things, is supposed to mediate between the two generations, between the parents and the children. The firstborn, then, needs to be seen as a transitional figure.

At the moment of crisis, where Moses needed some part of the nation to stand on his side and to call the rest of the nation to faithfulness, who had stood up? Not the firstborn more generally, but the Levites. Through their actions, they mark themselves out as those most fitting for the spiritual task of the firstborn, mediating between the Lord and his servants Moses and Aaron, and the rest of the people. From that point on, they would be the chief teachers of the people. We should consider the different stages of mediation here. The Lord speaks to Moses. Moses speaks to Aaron. Aaron directs his sons. The sons direct the Levites, and the Levites direct the rest of the people. We could consider this also in terms of the structure of the camp.

The tabernacle stands at the centre, where the Lord is enthroned above the cherubim. Only the high priests can go into the Holy of Holies, and only once a year. The priests, more generally, can go into the holy place. The Levites surround the tabernacle, and they assist the priests in their tasks. Then, beyond them, the whole of the rest of the tribes of Israel surround them. They are ordered in four larger groups, in each of the four cardinal directions.

[11 : 05] Each one of those groups has a leading tribe. Each one of the tribes has leading persons. There is then a glorious structure and order to the entire camp, and all lines ultimately converge upon the tabernacle, and the Lord's presence at its heart. Another way to see this is that the order that is at the heart of the tabernacle flows out from it, and is expressed in every single part of the camp. No person within the camp of Israel is detached from this divinely established glorious order, like stars and great constellations. Every person in Israel has their place within the heavenly camp.

The larger camp of Israel was numbered in chapters 1 and 2, and in chapter 2 they were arrayed around the tabernacle in the four cardinal directions, Judah as the leading tribe facing towards the east, to the sunrise. The Levites were exempt from that particular ordering. They were not going to be part of the military numbering. They were, as it were, palace guards and household stewards for the Lord's tent at the heart of the nation. The tribe of Levi has three great fathers' houses, Gershon, Kohath and Morari.

Perhaps the most important of these is Kohath. The rebel Korah, who we meet in chapter 16, comes from the clan of the Isharites within Kohath. Each of these groups of Levites has its own responsibilities. The Gershonites are especially responsible for the fabrics of the tabernacle, the tent and its covering, the screens, the hangings and the cords. The Kohathites are especially responsible for the furniture of the tabernacle, the ark, table, lampstand, altars and the vessels of the sanctuary. Morari's responsibilities chiefly have to do with the structure of the tabernacle, its frames, pillars, bars and bases and accessories. Like the rest of the tribes of Israel, each of these fathers' houses of the Levites were assigned to a camp and one of the cardinal directions of the camp of Israel. There was the need for one more group of Levites to take the camp towards the east and this position was taken by Moses, Aaron and his sons. As the leading tribe was Judah facing towards the east, the leading Levites were the priests. The individual families of the Levites are summed up and then the total is given to us. However, the numbers that we are given do not add up to 22,000, rather they add up to 22,300. Even if we were to argue that the numbers were rounded up to the nearest hundred, that would still give us at the very least 22,150.

Timothy Ashley suggests that a consonant dropped out in the transmission of the text and that the number of the Kohathites is actually 8,300. The total number of the Levites comes to 22,000.

22,000 and numbers related to it are quite common within the biblical text. The menorah, as James Bajan observes, has 22 flowers. In 1 Chronicles chapter 6, the genealogies of the Levites seems to be ordered around the number 22 in a number of different ways, numbers of generations, numbers of figures and in further ways besides. The Levites are going to be substituted for the firstborn among the people of Israel. But here we hit another numerical problem. The firstborn males of Israel are supposedly 22,273. However, of the males over 20 years of age, there are over 600,000. Surely we would expect a great many more of them to be firstborns. How do we account for this? It seems to me that the answer is found in the redemption price for the firstborn, which is 1,365 shekels, 5 shekels for each of the persons.

[14 : 33] In verse 43, we are told that the firstborn males are from a month old and upward. Once we've considered the amount of the redemption price, we can go to Leviticus chapter 27 verse 6 and find the price that will make everything fall into place. If the person is from a month old up to five years old, the valuation shall be for a male, five shekels of silver, and for a female, the valuation shall be three shekels of silver. Although it isn't mentioned here, it seems that it is only the firstborn from a month to five years of age that are being numbered. None of the older males of Israel have to be substituted for.

In treating chapter 1, I noted the way that the number 273 might be a significant one. Besides the fact that it is three quarters of a solar year, it is ten times the length of a sidereal lunar month.

The excess of the number of Israel over the round number of 600,000 is ten times the number of days in the sidereal lunar year, a year that has 13 months. Divide 600,000 by 22,000 and you also get something approximate to the length of time of the sidereal lunar month. We might then think of the Levites as representing months relative to the regular Israelites' days. The camp ordering is 12 tribes facing in the four cardinal directions, four Levite groups facing in the four cardinal directions, and the tabernacle in the centre. In chapter 1, we are told that the tribes were ordered by their signs.

It's the same word used in Genesis chapter 1 verse 14, when the stars are given for signs and for seasons. Judah is Leo, the lion. Reuben is Aquarius, the water-carrying man. Ephraim is Taurus, the bull.

And Dan is Scorpio, the serpent or eagle. The ordering corresponds to the ordering of the faces of the living creatures in Ezekiel chapter 1. The tribes can be seen as months. Levi has four seasons, and at the centre of it all is the tabernacle, which is akin to the glory of the sun, the Lord in his majestic presence. The camp of Israel, then, is a microcosm, a representation of the larger cosmos, the heavens, and also the higher heavens, where the Lord's throne is. The tribes of Israel are like great constellations of stars, all surrounding the sun of God's presence. The description of the ordering of the camp should also draw our attention back to the original sanctuary of the Garden of Eden.

[16 : 53] For instance, in verse 38, those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tent of meeting toward the sunrise, were Moses and Aaron and his sons, guarding the sanctuary itself to protect the people of Israel, and any outsider who came near was to be put to death.

After the Lord expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, we read, in verse 24 of chapter 3 of Genesis, He drove out the man, and at the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. The camp of Israel is, as it were, a new Eden, with the tabernacle at its heart, chiefly guarded by Moses and Aaron and their sons, who have been appointed to play a role like that of the cherubim.

A question to consider, what are some of the other ways in which we might relate the tabernacle and the order that surrounds it to the Garden of Eden?