

Numbers 3:1-16 • The Order of Priests

Introduction

How do you move two million people? You move them in an orderly manner.

When the Israelites came out of Egypt, there was no order to their exodus. In one sense, the exodus was a chaotic mass of people marching in no particular order. Thirteen months and a tabernacle later, the Hebrew nation is about to be led out into the wilderness toward the Promised Land. It is now time to get organized. The leaders have been chosen by God, the tabernacle has been designed by God, and now the marching and camping order will be designed by God.

The first ten chapters of Numbers involve preparations for moving out. Included in those preparations are instructions on moving the most sacred part of the camp – the tabernacle. The tabernacle is holy...it is where God meets man. It is so holy that improper handling or conduct in the tabernacle can result in death (Leviticus 10:1-2). The tabernacle must be handled carefully and according to God's design. Once erected, service within the tabernacle may be conducted only by those chosen by God Himself.

This study focuses on God's plan for moving, erecting and serving the tabernacle. Now that God has chosen Aaron as the high priest, He will now establish an order of priests to serve in the tabernacle.

¹Then the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, ²“Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head ³from twenty years old and upward, whoever is able to go out to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies.

⁴“With you, moreover, there shall be a man of each tribe, each one head of his father’s household. ⁵These then are the names of the men who shall stand with you:

of Reuben, Elizur the son of Shedeur;

⁶of Simeon, Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai;

⁷of Judah, Nahshon the son of Amminadab;

⁸of Issachar, Nethanel the son of Zuar;

⁹of Zebulun, Eliab the son of Helon;

¹⁰of the sons of Joseph:

of Ephraim, Elishama the son of Ammihud;

of Manasseh, Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur;

¹¹of Benjamin, Abidan the son of Gideoni;

¹²of Dan, Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai;

¹³of Asher, Pagiel the son of Ocran;

¹⁴of Gad, Eliasaph the son of Deuel;

¹⁵of Naphtali, Ahira the son of Enan.

[Read 1:1-16]

Q: Who is listed in verses 5-15, and what do they represent?

A: These are 10 sons of Jacob and 2 sons of Jacob's son, Joseph. These names represent the 12 tribes of Israel. Note that Joseph's sons, not Joseph himself, are named as tribes.

Q: What son of Jacob is missing from the list of tribes in verses 5-15?

A: Jacob's son Levi is not named. Levi was the father of the Levites. Both Moses and Aaron are Levites.

Numbers 3:1-16 • The Order of Priests, Page 1 of 6

¹⁶“These are they who were called of the congregation, the leaders of their fathers’ tribes; they were the heads of divisions of Israel.”

⁴⁷The Levites, however, were not numbered among them by their fathers’ tribe. ⁴⁸For the LORD had spoken to Moses, saying, ⁴⁹“Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor shall you take their census among the sons of Israel. ⁵⁰But you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings and over all that belongs to it. They shall carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of it; they shall also camp around the tabernacle. ⁵¹So when the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle encamps, the Levites shall set it up. But the layman who comes near shall be put to death.

⁵²“The sons of Israel shall camp, each man by his own camp, and each man by his own standard, according to their armies. ⁵³But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, so that there will be no wrath on the congregation of the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the testimony.”

⁵⁴Thus the sons of Israel did; according to all which the LORD had commanded Moses, so they did.

¹Now these are the records of the generations of Aaron and Moses at the time when the LORD spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai.

²These then are the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab the firstborn, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.

³These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he ordained to serve as priests. ⁴But Nadab and Abihu died before the LORD when they offered strange 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 their father Aaron.

⁵Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁶“Bring the tribe of Levi near and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him.

⁷“They shall perform the duties for him and for the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, to do the service of the

[Read 1:47-54]

Q: There are two reasons God does not include the Levites in the census nor count them among the 12 tribes. What are they?

A: First, the census was organized according to those who could go to war (1:3). Women, those under the age of 20 and those unable “to go out to war” were not included in the census. Second, the Levites were called for a special assignment that excluded them from going to war.

Q: What was God’s purpose for excluding the Levites from the main census?

A: “But you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings and over all that belongs to it” (1:50).

Q: What, then, were the duties of the Levites?

1. To carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings (v.50)
2. To “take care” of the tabernacle (v.50)
3. To camp around the tabernacle to protect “laymen” (non-Levites) from death (v.50)
4. To take the tabernacle down and set it up after every move (v.51)
5. To camp around the tabernacle to protect the camp from God’s wrath (v.53)
6. To “keep charge” of the tabernacle; more specifically, the testimony (v.53)

[Read 3:1-13]

Q: In verse 6, who is the recipient of the Levites’ service?

A: Specifically, the Levites are to serve Aaron and his sons. But they are also serving God and serving the “whole congregation” in that they are performing the service of the tabernacle.

Q: Why has God chosen an entire tribe to serve Him in the tabernacle? (see verses 12-13)

A: He chose the tribe of Levi to serve in the tabernacle rather than the firstborn son of every family. This establishes what is called the Levitical priesthood.

Q: Therefore, who are the only men who could serve as priests in and around the tabernacle?

A: The Levites. This law was in effect through the time of Christ. After the destruction of Herod’s temple in 70 AD, all genealogical records were lost and no Jew today can identify himself as belonging to a specific tribe. This is problematic for those Jews today who wish to resume Levitical sacrifices...only a Levite may serve as a priest, and only a priest can perform ritual sacrifices. (There is one exception, but it goes beyond the scope of this study to present details.)

tabernacle.

⁸“They shall also keep all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, along with the duties of the sons of Israel, to do the service of the tabernacle.

⁹“You shall thus give the Levites to Aaron and to his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the sons of Israel. ¹⁰So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons that they may keep their priesthood, but the layman who comes near shall be put to death.

¹¹Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹²“Now, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the sons of Israel instead of every firstborn, the first issue of the womb among the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall be Mine. ¹³For all the firstborn are Mine; on the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, from man to beast. They shall be Mine; I am the LORD.”

¹⁴Then the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying, ¹⁵“Number the sons of Levi by their fathers’ households, by their families; every male from a month old and upward you shall number.”

¹⁶So Moses numbered them according to the word of the LORD, just as he had been commanded.

Q: How completely were the Levites given to Aaron; that is, to serve in the tabernacle?

A: Verse 9 states, “...they are wholly given...” That means the entire tribe and every member of it. It also means that is **all** the Levites are to do, to serve as mediators between God and the Israelites through the tabernacle, or later, the temple, sacrifices.

[Read 3:14-16]

Q: How did the numbering of the Levites differ from the census taken of the other tribes?

A: Unlike the other tribes which were numbered according to those who could go out to war, the Levite males are simply numbered, beginning at one month of age. This implies that Levites were set aside for life to serve in the priesthood.

Q: What, specifically, were the duties of the three families of the Levites?

A: (The answer to this is found in chapter 4.) They are as follows.

The Kohathites: They were in charge of “*the most holy things*” under Aaron’s strict supervision (all the sacred utensils used for worship and objects in the holy place; v. 4).

The Gershonites: They were in charge of serving and in carrying the curtains, screens and partitions. They would also be in charge of setting them up (v. 24).

The Merarites: They were in charge of carrying the framework for the temple.

The duties were most likely based on the number of men required to do the tasks efficiently. Their numbers were as follows:

The Kohathites, 8600

The Gershonites, 7500

The Merarites, 6200

Q: What is the pattern that God has established by setting aside the Levites for serving as the priesthood?

A: The point is that God Himself chose those who would serve Him in the tabernacle, that place where God and man meet. That was their primary purpose for existence. There is an order to the priesthood, starting with Aaron the High Priest. Every Levite is a priest, and every priest has a specific part to play in the worship of God.

¹⁷Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Hebrews 2:17

¹Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession;

Hebrews 3:1

¹For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; ²he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; ³and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. ⁴And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was. ⁵So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him,

“YOU ARE MY SON,
TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU”;

⁶just as He says also in another passage,

“YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER
ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF
MELCHIZEDEK.”

Hebrews 5:1-6

¹Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ²a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. ³For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; so it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. ⁴Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; ⁵who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, “SEE,” He says, “THAT YOU MAKE ALL THINGS ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN WHICH WAS SHOWN YOU ON THE MOUNTAIN.”

Hebrews 8:1-5

Overall Application

- *In what way is Aaron the High Priest a type of Christ? (see Hebrews 2:17; 3:1; 5:1-6; 8:1-5 to the left.)*
- *In what way is the Levitical priesthood a type of Christian (or more specifically, the church)? (1 Peter 2:4-10; Rev 1:6; 5:8-10; 20:6 to the left.)*
- *Based on the above verses and the lesson from Numbers on the Levitical priesthood, what is the role of believers today?*
- *How does this study change your view of yourself and your role in God's kingdom? How does this affect your purpose for living and worship? How does this affect your relationship to the world and non-Christians around you? How does this study affect your self-image?*
- *Read Romans 12:1-2 (on the bottom left). How does this study affect your personal application of these verses?*

Numbers 3:1-16 • The Order of Priests, Page 4 of 6

⁴And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, ⁵you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁶For this is contained in Scripture:

“BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE
STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone,
AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL
NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.”

⁷This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve,

“THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS
REJECTED,
THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER
stone,”

⁸and,

“A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK
OF OFFENSE”;

for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

12 Peter 2:4-10

⁶and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 1:6

⁸When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

¹⁰“You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

Revelation 5:8-10

Numbers 3:1-16 • The Order of Priests, Page 5 of 6

⁶Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

Revelation 20:6

¹Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2