



## Numbers - Chapter Eighteen

### III Numbers 13:1-19:22 - Forty Years Near Kadesh (continues)

#### Summary of Chapter Eighteen

The preceding events have demonstrated the necessity of properly appointed mediators between God and Israel, if the nation's sins are not to lead to their destruction. This chapter sums up the duties of the priests, as confirmed by Leviticus 10:8-11, and Levites, and lays down the rewards that they are to receive for their service. Aaron's special status is underlined by God speaking directly to him in v1 and v.8. Usually in Numbers God speaks to Moses, who then passes on his instruction to the appropriate people.

#### III.e Numbers 18:1-32 - Duties and Privileges of Priests and Levites

Refer to the chapter summary above.

#### III.e.i Numbers 18:1-7 - Responsibility of Priests and Levites

In general, the priests, as the descendants of Aaron, must guard the interior of the tabernacle (vv.5-7), and the Levites must guard its exterior (vv.3-4). This is to prevent intrusion by any outsider, i.e. by an unauthorised person, who is to be executed if caught (v.4 and v.7). If a Levite should trespass into the area guarded by the priests, both Levite and priest will die (v.3). These rigorous measures are designed that there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel (v.5). In the future, the risk of divine judgement is limited to the priests and Levites, who bear the responsibility connected with the priesthood (v.1).

<sup>1</sup> The Lord said to Aaron: You and your sons and your ancestral house with you shall bear responsibility for offences connected with the sanctuary, while you and your sons alone shall bear responsibility for offences connected with the priesthood.

## Numbers 18:1

You and your sons and your ancestral house with you. The priests, that is, Aaron, his sons, and their descendants, shall bear responsibility related to the sanctuary, and the priesthood. They were accountable to God: <<*You shall make a rosette of pure gold, and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, 'Holy to the Lord.'* You shall fasten it on the turban with a blue cord; it shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations; it shall always be on his forehead, in order that they may find favour before the Lord>> (Exodus 28:36-38).

Shall bear responsibility. This is the other side of Aaron's prerogative as the chosen priest of God, as demonstrated with the budding of the staff in Chapter 17. Moses had authority from God; but he also had accountability. God never gives authority without accountability; the two always go together. If God gives someone headship and expects others to submit to them, God also has a special accountability for that person.

<sup>2</sup> So bring with you also your brothers of the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, in order that they may be joined to you, and serve you while you and your sons with you are in front of the tent of the covenant. <sup>3</sup> They shall perform duties for you and for the whole tent. But they must not approach either the utensils of the sanctuary or the altar, otherwise both they and you will die. <sup>4</sup> They are attached to you in order to perform the duties of the tent of meeting, for all the service of the tent; no outsider shall approach you. <sup>5</sup> You yourselves shall perform the duties of the sanctuary and the duties of the altar, so that wrath may never again come upon the Israelites. <sup>6</sup> It is I who now take your brother Levites from among the Israelites; they are now yours as a gift, dedicated to the Lord, to perform the service of the tent of meeting. <sup>7</sup> But you and your sons with you shall diligently perform your priestly duties in all that concerns the altar and the area behind the curtain. I give your priesthood as a gift; any outsider who approaches shall be put to death.

## Numbers 18:2-7

So bring with you also your brothers of the tribe of Levi. Aaron himself was of the tribe of Levi. While only he and his descendants were given the priesthood, the whole tribe of Levi had a special calling to help Aaron and the priests.

That they may be joined to you, and serve you. The Levites were the support people for the ministry of the priests. They did not have the prominent position, but were important for their behind-the-scenes service, as well as the transportation of the tabernacle and its furniture when the Israelites travelled.

But they must not approach either the utensils of the sanctuary or the altar. The Levites were not allowed to do what the priests did. In the same way, the NT says that members of the church are all different ‘parts’ of the body, each with particular gifts and callings: *<<Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good>>* (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

Otherwise both they and you will die. The priests, as leaders in the tabernacle, bear responsibility for the conduct of the other Levites and will be held equally accountable for the actions of others who fail to obey God in their service.

I give your priesthood as a gift. Although the priesthood was to be the birthright of the descendants of Aaron, this is a reminder that it was a gift from God and not something they earned or that should make them boast of in their own strength: *<<And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was>>* (Hebrews 5:4).

Any outsider who approaches shall be put to death. This is another reminder that only the priests could serve at the altar of God and that anyone who tried to even approach the holy articles would be put to death.

### III.e.ii Numbers 18:8-32 - The Priests’ Portion

The tribe of Levi was dedicated to God and would not receive an inheritance of land in the way the other twelve tribes would, so God ensured they would be provided for from the offerings made by the other twelve tribes. The first part deals with the food offerings that could only be consumed by the priests and this would ensure that they and their families would always have sufficient to eat. The second part then deals with the financial giving of the people, their tithes, which would go to supporting all Levites for the work they undertook in the sanctuary and their service to God on behalf of the people. Lastly, the Levites were to give a tithe of their income to the priests.

#### III.e.ii.1 Numbers 18:8-20 - The Priests’ Income

The income allotted to the priests is derived from the sacrifices and similar offerings. Most of the privileges listed here are mentioned elsewhere in the law, but here the rights are all brought together. First, there are the parts of those sacrifices that only priests could eat: the cereal, sin, and guilt-offerings (vv.8-10).

Second are those sacrifices and other offerings that all clean members of the priestly families could eat (vv.11-19). These include parts of the peace-offerings (v.11), first fruits of the harvest (vv.12-13), and firstborn animals (vv.17-18). Firstborn humans and unclean animals cannot be sacrificed but instead must be redeemed. That means the parents must pay five shekels to the priests to redeem their firstborn son (v.16); refer also to Exodus 13:1-2 and 13:11-16.

<sup>8</sup> The Lord spoke to Aaron: I have given you charge of the offerings made to me, all the holy gifts of the Israelites; I have given them to you and your sons as a priestly portion due to you in perpetuity. <sup>9</sup> This shall be yours from the most holy things, reserved from the fire: every offering of theirs that they render to me as a most holy thing, whether grain-offering, sin-offering, or guilt-offering, shall belong to you and your sons. <sup>10</sup> As a most holy thing you shall eat it; every male may eat it; it shall be holy to you. <sup>11</sup> This also is yours: I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due, whatever is set aside from the gifts of all the elevation-offerings of the Israelites; everyone who is clean in your house may eat them. <sup>12</sup> All the best of the oil and all the best of the wine and of the grain, the choice produce that they give to the Lord, I have given to you. <sup>13</sup> The first fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the Lord, shall be yours; everyone who is clean in your house may eat of it. <sup>14</sup> Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours. <sup>15</sup> The first issue of the womb of all creatures, human and animal, which is offered to the Lord, shall be yours; but the firstborn of human beings you shall redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. <sup>16</sup> Their redemption price, reckoned from one month of age, you shall fix at five shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary (that is, twenty gerahs). <sup>17</sup> But the firstborn of a cow, or the firstborn of a sheep, or the firstborn of a goat, you shall not redeem; they are holy. You shall dash their blood on the altar, and shall turn their fat into smoke as an offering by fire for a pleasing odour to the Lord; <sup>18</sup> but their flesh shall be yours, just as the breast that is elevated and as the right thigh are yours. <sup>19</sup> All the holy offerings that the Israelites present to the Lord I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due; it is a covenant of salt for ever before the Lord for you and your descendants as well. <sup>20</sup> Then the Lord said to Aaron: You shall

have no allotment in their land, nor shall you have any share among them; I am your share and your possession among the Israelites.

#### Numbers 18:8-20

I have given you charge of the offerings made to me. Every offering given to God was holy, i.e. all the holy gifts of the Israelites. Yet, as a gracious act of recognition for the service the priest would give to God, he allowed the priests to keep the parts of the offerings that were not consumed by fire, i.e. the parts that were reserved from the fire. Thus they and their families would have sufficient food to eat.

The first issue of the womb of all creatures, human and animal, which is offered to the Lord, shall be yours. When the firstborn was brought to the tabernacle, either to be given or redeemed with money, it also belonged to the priest. The redemption price could be kept by the priests in order to pay for their cost of living. In the case of Samuel no redemption price was paid for the child was given to the priest Eli so that he could serve God through his service to Eli: *<<The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, 'As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and remain there for ever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time'>>* (1 Samuel 1:21-22).

All the holy offerings that the Israelites present to the Lord I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due. All of these belonged to the priests, and it was vitally important the children of Israel fulfil their obligation to bring these things: *<<these the Lord commanded to be given them, when he anointed them, as a perpetual due from the people of Israel throughout their generations>>* (Leviticus 7:36), and: *<<He commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites, so that they might devote themselves to the law of the Lord>>* (2 Chronicles 31:4); God calls it a covenant of salt forever.

A covenant of salt for ever indicates a permanent and inviolable principle, as confirmed by: *<<Do you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel for ever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?>>* (2 Chronicles 13:5). The significance of salt may be its qualities as a lasting preservative, well known throughout the ancient Near East, or its use as a seasoning of food, which would point to a shared meal between the two parties of the covenant as symbolic of their friendship and the binding nature of their agreement. Salt speaks of purity, of preservation, and of expense.

### III.e.ii.2 Numbers 18:21-24 - The Levites' Income

The income of the Levites comes from the tithe given by the other tribes. It is their reward for:

1. Their transporting of the tabernacle.
2. Their service in the tent of meeting.
3. Their shouldering the risk associated with holy things, so that the people of Israel do not come near and die (v.22).

It also compensates them for having no inheritance among the people of Israel (vv.23-24); that is, unlike other tribes, they had no tribal territory, only 48 cities scattered through the land (Numbers 35:1-8). Their tribal 'inheritance' is not an allocation of land but their task of serving at the sanctuary for the sake of the people. The Levites do not need an allocation of tribal land because their service in the presence of the Lord, and the tithe of the people of Israel, is their more-than-sufficient inheritance.

<sup>21</sup> To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for a possession in return for the service that they perform, the service in the tent of meeting. <sup>22</sup> From now on the Israelites shall no longer approach the tent of meeting, or else they will incur guilt and die. <sup>23</sup> But the Levites shall perform the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear responsibility for their own offences; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations. But among the Israelites they shall have no allotment, <sup>24</sup> because I have given to the Levites as their portion the tithe of the Israelites, which they set apart as an offering to the Lord. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no allotment among the Israelites.

#### Numbers 18:21-24

To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for a possession. God commanded the tithes, a giving of ten percent of one's gross income, be given to the Levites for their support. The tithes belong to God but he gives them to the Levites. When an Israelite was not giving their tithe, they were not robbing the Levites, even though the money ended up with them. They were robbing God: *<<Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me – the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing>>* (Malachi 3:8-10), because God received the tithe from the giver, and he gave it to the Levites.

Some people today think the tithe, since it went to support the Levites who were, in a sense, government workers in ancient Israel, is covered by government taxes of today, and that free-will giving mentioned in the OT answers to the NT emphasis on giving. It can be claimed that the NT nowhere specifically commands tithing, but it certainly does speak of it in a positive light, if it is done with a right heart: <<*But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practised, without neglecting the others*>> (Luke 11:42). It is also important to understand that tithing is not a principle dependent on the Mosaic Law; as Hebrews 7:5-9 explains, tithing was practiced and honoured by God before the Law of Moses.

What the NT does speak with great clarity on is the principle of giving; that giving should be regular, planned, proportional, and private: <<*Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come*>> (1 Corinthians 16:1-4); that it must be generous, freely given, and cheerful (2 Corinthians Chapter 9).

Since the NT does not emphasise tithing, one might not be strict on it for Christians, although some Christians do argue against tithing on the basis of self-interest; but since giving is to be proportional, a percentage of gross earnings should be given, and ten percent is a good benchmark and starting place! For some to give ten percent is nowhere near enough; for others, at their present time, five percent may be a massive step of faith. If the question is, “How little can I give and still be pleasing to God?” the heart is not in the right place at all. A believer should have the attitude of some early Christians, who essentially said: “We’re not under the tithe, we can give more!” Giving and financial management is a spiritual issue, not just a financial one: <<*So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?*>> (Luke 16:11 NIV).

In return for the service that they perform. The tithes were also given by God as pay to the Levites, not as gifts: <<*for the scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain’, and, ‘The labourer deserves to be paid’*>> (1 Timothy 5:18). Because the Levites had dedicated themselves to the service of God, the people of God, and the things of God, it was right they be supported by God, through the tithes of the children of Israel. In return for the work which they perform means the Levites had the ‘right’ to expect to be supported through the tithe. Paul presents the same principle for ministers of the Gospel in the NT (1 Corinthians 9:7-14); yet also shows that when it is better for the Gospel, the right should be willingly laid down for God’s glory (1 Corinthians 9:15). However, once every three years, the tithe was collected and distributed

not only to the Levites, but also to the poor and needy among Israel: <<**Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake**>> (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

But the Levites shall perform the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear responsibility for their own offences. This shows that the Levites also had a special responsibility. If they were to be supported through the tithe, they had to do the job, and do it with diligence. There are probably few things worse than one supported through the gifts of God's people who is lazy at his job; if a man is robbing his employer by laziness, how much more a minister of the Gospel.

But among the Israelites they shall have no allotment. Just as with the priests, it was a trade-off. The Levites did not have the best of both worlds; they did not have a personal inheritance of land as the other tribes did. Those who are supported through the giving of God's people should expect that they would not have the best of both worlds; they will not be wealthy in this life, although they should be comfortable. It is wrong for the congregation to keep the pastor 'humble' through poverty: <<**Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching**>> (1 Timothy 5:17), and just as wrong for the pastor to be using the gifts of God's people to live above God's people.

### III.e.ii.3 Numbers 18:25-32 - The Tithe of the Tithe

The Levites had to give a tenth of their income to the priests. Indeed, as God's representatives the priests were to receive the best tenth of the tithe (vv.29-30); refer also to Leviticus 22:18-25, Malachi 1:6-14 and 3:6-10.

<sup>25</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>26</sup> You shall speak to the Levites, saying: When you receive from the Israelites the tithe that I have given you from them for your portion, you shall set apart an offering from it to the Lord, a tithe of the tithe. <sup>27</sup> It shall be reckoned to you as your gift, the same as the grain of the threshing-floor and the fullness of the wine press. <sup>28</sup> Thus you also shall set apart an offering to the Lord from all the tithes that you receive from the Israelites; and from them you shall give the Lord's offering to the priest Aaron. <sup>29</sup> Out of all the gifts to you, you shall set apart every offering due to the Lord; the best of all of them is the part to be consecrated. <sup>30</sup> Say also to them: When you have set apart the best of it, then the rest shall be reckoned to the Levites as produce of the threshing-floor, and as

produce of the wine press. <sup>31</sup> You may eat it in any place, you and your households; for it is your payment for your service in the tent of meeting. <sup>32</sup> You shall incur no guilt by reason of it, when you have offered the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy gifts of the Israelites, on pain of death.

### Numbers 18:25-32

A tithe of the tithe. The Levites themselves were not exempt from tithing. They were also to give a tenth, and the best of them given as the tenth, due to the Lord, and the Lord gave it to the priests. It was important for the Levites to learn how to be givers also; just because they were supported through the giving of God's people, it did not mean they did not need to give. Everyone in church needs to learn how to be givers, because God is a giver, and they are being transformed into the image of Jesus.

Out of all the gifts to you, you shall set apart every offering due to the Lord; the best of all of them is the part to be consecrated. It is not revealed if or how the priests were to tithe from what they received; presumably they did not, because what belonged to the priests was considered holy, and not to be used by others outside the priestly families.

This chapter clearly shows that the obligation of the Israelite to give was far more than just the tithe, i.e. the giving of ten percent; the Israelite also had to give the first fruits of all their produce and the firstborn of their flocks and herds, portions of each that went to the priests and/or Levites. Firstborn and first fruits were 'risky' giving; an individual's land might not yield much more produce, and their cow or ewe might not give birth again, yet the first still belonged to God, and was given to the priests. God promised to bless this giving of the first fruits and firstborn in faith: <<*Honour the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine*>> (Proverbs 3:9-10).

This was not the end of Israel's required giving; they were also told to leave a portion of their fields unharvested so the poor could eat from those portions (Leviticus 19:9-10), a Passover sacrifice was required from each family every year (Exodus 12:43-47), sometimes a temple tax was required (Nehemiah 10:32-33), or a special tribute (Numbers 32:28-29).

It is hard to estimate exactly how much the first fruits and firstborn obligations amounted to; it would differ from family to family. However, the actual required giving of Israel was far more than ten percent, i.e. their tithe. Some say that Deuteronomy 12:6 speaks of another ten percent given, sometimes referred to as the 'festival tithe', but in context Deuteronomy Chapter 12 is only speaking of where to bring the tithe, not commanding an additional one to

be brought; others have said Deuteronomy 14:28-29 speaks of another tithe, sometimes called the 'poor tithe', to be brought every three years, but since it speaks of the tithe, and since it also goes to the Levites and not just to the poor, it is best to understand that this is not an additional tithe either, but a command that once every three years the tithe also be made available to the poor, not just to the Levites. Besides the required giving, Israel was asked to give free-will offerings. This chapter speaks of willingly given sacrifices, of which the heave offering went to the priests (vv.9-11). This was not the end of Israel's voluntary giving; they also were asked to give for special projects like the building of the tabernacle (Exodus 35:4-9), and free-will giving to the poor.