



Numbers - Chapter Three

I Numbers 1:1-10:10 - Israel Prepares to Enter the Land (continues)

Summary of Chapter Three

This chapter commences the census of the tribe of Levi. It starts by naming Aaron and his sons, including the two who had died, for they were the anointed priests. God then instructs Moses to call the other Levites before Aaron to anoint them for their service in the tabernacle.

The Levites, descendants of Levi's sons Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, are then counted according to their clans. Unlike the other Israelites, who were numbered from 20 years upwards, the Levites are counted from one month old. Each of the clans is then given their respective tasks.

God then instructed that all first born males aged one month and above should be counted. All firstborn males are to be consecrated to the Lord, who now states they are to be redeemed by Levites, with the excess firstborn being redeemed at a cost of 5 shekels per firstborn.

I.c Numbers 3:1-4:49 - Two censuses of the Levites

The two censuses count different groups of Levites: the first (3:1-51) counts every male Levite over one month old, whereas the second (4:1-49) counts those between 30 and 50 years of age. The male Levites took the place of the firstborn males of the other tribes in order to serve the Lord, so the first census ensures that the number of the former matches the number of the latter. Transporting the tabernacle requires strength, so the second census aims to find if there are enough able-bodied male Levites for this task.

I.c.i Numbers 3:1-51 - Census of all male Levites

This census focuses on the Levites' ongoing role in Israel.

I.c.i.1 Numbers 3:1-4 - The Sons of Aaron

This census begins with the priests, the most holy family of the Levites. The priests were descended from Aaron, who belonged to the Kohathite clan within the tribe of Levi (Exodus 6:16-25). Because of their high status, they camped to the east of the tabernacle, guarding its entrance (v.38); the tribe of Judah camped farther out (Numbers 2:3). Despite their privileges, two sons of Aaron died as a result of giving an unauthorised incense offering (v.4); refer also to Leviticus 10:1-20.

¹ This is the lineage of Aaron and Moses at the time when the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. ² These are the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab the firstborn, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar; ³ these are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he ordained to minister as priests. ⁴ Nadab and Abihu died before the Lord when they offered unholy fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children. Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aaron.

Numbers 3:1-4

Nadab the firstborn, and Abihu. Nadab and Abihu were the two oldest children of Aaron, and the two ranking priests behind him, yet they were struck down by the Lord for offering profane fire before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-7). Therefore, Eleazar and Ithamar inherited the priesthood, and passed it down to their sons after them.

These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he ordained to minister as priests. It is important to realise that the priests were only one small family among the Levites; to be a priest and a Levite were not the same thing at all. Only those who were descendants of Aaron could be priests.

I.c.i.2 Numbers 3:5-13 - The Duties of the Levites

The two principal tasks of the Levites included:

1. Guarding the tabernacle from intruders.
2. Ministering at the tabernacle, i.e. transporting it from place to place. How this is to be done is explained in Chapter 4.

In the tenth and final plague, every firstborn male Egyptian and every firstborn of their cattle died, but the Israelites and cattle were spared. So after this, all Israelite firstborn males and cattle were dedicated to God. That meant the cattle

were sacrificed and the males should have served God in the sanctuary (Exodus 11:4-13:15). However, after the golden calf incident, the Levites took the place of the firstborn males (Exodus 32:25-29).

⁵ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ⁶ Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, so that they may assist him. ⁷ They shall perform duties for him and for the whole congregation in front of the tent of meeting, doing service at the tabernacle; ⁸ they shall be in charge of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and attend to the duties for the Israelites as they do service at the tabernacle. ⁹ You shall give the Levites to Aaron and his descendants; they are unreservedly given to him from among the Israelites. ¹⁰ But you shall make a register of Aaron and his descendants; it is they who shall attend to the priesthood, and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death.

Numbers 3:5-10

Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, so that they may assist him. The entire tribe of Levi was given to serve the needs of Aaron and the priests, i.e. they shall perform duties for him, the needs of the whole congregation at large, and the needs of the tabernacle itself, that is, they shall be in charge of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, as they do service at the tabernacle. Moses would again remind the people that it was God who chose this tribe to serve him: <<*At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister to him, and to bless in his name, to this day*>> (Deuteronomy 10:8). Many generations later, King Hezekiah reminded the Levites of this as well: <<*My sons, do not now be negligent, for the Lord has chosen you to stand in his presence to minister to him, and to be his ministers and make offerings to him*>> (2 Chronicles 29:11).

They do service at the tabernacle. In some ways, being a priest was far more visible and perhaps 'glamorous' than being a Levite. However, the service of the Levites made the work of the priests possible, and was seen by God as having equal value. This should also be the case in the church. There are those seen at the front leading worship, preaching, etc. with many others carrying on various tasks of ministry, administration and other required tasks that allow the church to function effectively. Such additional work is just as vital as that undertaken by those in leadership roles.

Any outsider who comes near shall be put to death. Only descendants of Aaron could perform the duties of a priest and only the descendants of the other

Levitical tribes could perform the other duties of the tabernacle. If anyone else, Hebrew or Gentile, approached the tabernacle to perform any of the Levitical tasks for whatever reason, they would be committing an affront to God and would be put to death.

¹¹ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ¹² I hereby accept the Levites from among the Israelites as substitutes for all the firstborn that open the womb among the Israelites. The Levites shall be mine, ¹³ for all the firstborn are mine; when I killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both human and animal; they shall be mine. I am the Lord.

Numbers 3:11-13

I hereby accept the Levites from among the Israelites as substitutes for all the firstborn that open the womb among the Israelites. The firstborn belonged to God; a firstborn lamb from a ewe would be given to the Lord. God did not want human sacrifice, so he took the tribe of Levi as a substitute for Israel's firstborn.

For all the firstborn are mine. God had enshrined this in law. He wanted all firstborn males, both human and from their livestock, to be dedicated to him: <<*The Lord said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine*>> (Exodus 13:1-2).

When I killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt is a reference to the tenth plague, which finally persuaded Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave: <<*At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock*>> (Exodus 12:29).

I.c.i.3 Numbers 3:14-39 - A Census of the Levites

The census results are listed by clan, specifying which parts of the tabernacle each clan was responsible for carrying and which side they had to guard. Most privileged were the eight thousand six hundred Kohathites, who camped on the south side of the tabernacle and were responsible for the ark and other holy furniture. Next in privilege were the seven thousand five hundred Gershonites, who camped on the west side and who were responsible for the curtains and hangings. Finally came the six thousand two hundred Merarites, who camped on the north side and looked after the frames, pegs, etc. The total number of Levites (v.39) is 22,000, which is 300 less than the sum of the individual clans. The likeliest explanation is that, due to a copyist's error, the number of Kohathites should be eight thousand three hundred, not eight thousand six hundred. The numerals 6 and 3 are very similar in Hebrew. The location of the priests at the east side of the tabernacle guarding its

entrance (v.38) may anticipate the role of Jesus as high priest, giving his people access to God's presence in heaven as indicated in Hebrews Chapters 9-10.

¹⁴ Then the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying:
¹⁵ Enrol the Levites by ancestral houses and by clans. You shall enrol every male from a month old and upwards. ¹⁶ So Moses enrolled them according to the word of the Lord, as he was commanded. ¹⁷ The following were the sons of Levi, by their names: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. ¹⁸ These are the names of the sons of Gershon by their clans: Libni and Shimei. ¹⁹ The sons of Kohath by their clans: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel. ²⁰ The sons of Merari by their clans: Mahli and Mushi. These are the clans of the Levites, by their ancestral houses.

Numbers 3:14-20

Enrol the Levites by ancestral houses and by clans. Although they were not counted among the available soldiers, the Levites were still to be counted, and counted by the males from a month old and upwards. This differs from all the other tribes whose males were counted from the age of twenty. They were to be categorised by the families, with the main grouping according to Levi's three sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari.

²¹ To Gershon belonged the clan of the Libnites and the clan of the Shimeites; these were the clans of the Gershonites. ²² Their enrolment, counting all the males from a month old and upwards, was seven thousand five hundred. ²³ The clans of the Gershonites were to camp behind the tabernacle on the west, ²⁴ with Eliasaph son of Lael as head of the ancestral house of the Gershonites. ²⁵ The responsibility of the sons of Gershon in the tent of meeting was to be the tabernacle, the tent with its covering, the screen for the entrance of the tent of meeting, ²⁶ the hangings of the court, the screen for the entrance of the court that is around the tabernacle and the altar, and its cords – all the service pertaining to these.

Numbers 3:21-26

The clans of the Gershonites were to camp behind the tabernacle on the west. The seven thousand five hundred male Gershonites were to camp westward of the tabernacle in between the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh, and the tabernacle itself.

The responsibility of the sons of Gershon. The Gershonites were to take care of the skins that covered the tabernacle itself, as well as all the screens and curtains. This would involve the erection, maintenance, dismantling and transportation of this equipment.

²⁷ To Kohath belonged the clan of the Amramites, the clan of the Izharites, the clan of the Hebronites, and the clan of the Uzzielites; these are the clans of the Kohathites. ²⁸ Counting all the males, from a month old and upwards, there were eight thousand six hundred, attending to the duties of the sanctuary. ²⁹ The clans of the Kohathites were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle, ³⁰ with Elizaphan son of Uzziel as head of the ancestral house of the clans of the Kohathites. ³¹ Their responsibility was to be the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the vessels of the sanctuary with which the priests minister, and the screen – all the service pertaining to these. ³² Eleazar son of Aaron the priest was to be chief over the leaders of the Levites, and to have oversight of those who had charge of the sanctuary.

Numbers 3:27-32

These are the clans of the Kohathites. The eight thousand six hundred male Kohathites were to camp southward of the tabernacle in between the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Simeon, and the tabernacle itself.

Their responsibility was all the furniture including the Ark of the Covenant, the altars and the lampstand. As well as the transportation of these items, they were responsible for the servicing of them.

All the service pertaining to these. Since their duties included the care of the ceremonial items, they came under the direct supervision of a priest, initially Eleazar. He also had supervisory responsibility for all the Levitical leaders.

³³ To Merari belonged the clan of the Mahlites and the clan of the Mushites: these are the clans of Merari. ³⁴ Their enrolment, counting all the males from a month old and upwards, was six thousand two hundred. ³⁵ The head of the ancestral house of the clans of Merari was Zuriel son of Abihail; they were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle. ³⁶ The responsibility assigned to the sons of Merari was to be the frames of the tabernacle, the bars, the pillars, the bases, and all their accessories – all the service pertaining to these; ³⁷ also the pillars of the court all around, with their bases and pegs and cords.

Numbers 3:33-37

These are the clans of Merari. The family of six thousand two hundred male Merarites were to camp northward of the tabernacle in between the tribes of Dan, Asher and Naphtali, and the tabernacle itself.

The responsibility assigned to the sons of Merari was to erect, dismantle, maintain and transport all the structural elements of the tabernacle.

³⁸ Those who were to camp in front of the tabernacle on the east – in front of the tent of meeting towards the east – were Moses and Aaron and Aaron's sons, having charge of the rites within the sanctuary, whatever had to be done for the Israelites; and any outsider who came near was to be put to death. ³⁹ The total enrolment of the Levites whom Moses and Aaron enrolled at the commandment of the Lord, by their clans, all the males from a month old and upwards, was twenty-two thousand.

Numbers 3:38-39

Those who were to camp in front of the tabernacle on the east. The families of Moses and Aaron were to dwell on the remaining side of the tabernacle, forming a protective barrier between it and the tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun. It was the primary position as it was closest to the entrance to the tent of meeting.

Moses and Aaron and Aaron's sons, having charge of the rites within the sanctuary. God's order and organisation extends to certain jobs for certain people to do. The families of the Levites had certain callings they were to fulfil. There was no one man or family to do everything; God made them dependent on one another to accomplish the work.

The total twenty-two thousand Levites given in v.39 does not tally with the totals of the individual clans given in v.22, v.28 and v.34, which come to twenty-two thousand three hundred. Some commentators say that the discrepancy is most easily explained as textual corruption in v.28. The number of Kohathites may originally have been eight thousand three hundred since 3, Hebrew *s/s*, could quite easily have been corrupted into 6, Hebrew *ss*.

I.c.i.4 Numbers 3:40-51 - The Redemption of the Firstborn

The census showed there were two hundred and seventy three fewer Levites than firstborn males in the other tribes. To redeem these two hundred and seventy three Israelites who had no Levite to take their place, five shekels per person had to be paid (v.47). This is the tariff prescribed in Leviticus 27:6 for males aged under five years. Five shekels would have been about a year's pay for a herdsman.

⁴⁰ Then the Lord said to Moses: Enrol all the firstborn males of the Israelites, from a month old and upwards, and count their names.

⁴¹ But you shall accept the Levites for me – I am the Lord – as substitutes for all the firstborn among the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites as substitutes for all the firstborn among the livestock of the Israelites. ⁴² So Moses enrolled all the firstborn among the Israelites, as the Lord commanded him. ⁴³ The total enrolment, all the firstborn males from a month old and upwards, counting the number of names, was twenty-two thousand two hundred and seventy-three.

Numbers 3:40-43

All the firstborn males were twenty-two thousand two hundred and seventy-three. If the total population was over two million, as many believe the Israelites were at that time, then this number would likely only represent the number of firstborn males born in the thirteen months since the exodus. Other interpreters understand this figure as the total of all firstborn in Israel, which would then indicate a much smaller total population.

⁴⁴ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ⁴⁵ Accept the Levites as substitutes for all the firstborn among the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites as substitutes for their livestock; and the Levites shall be mine. I am the Lord. ⁴⁶ As the price of redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the Israelites, over and above the number of the Levites, ⁴⁷ you shall accept five shekels apiece, reckoning by the shekel of the sanctuary, a shekel of twenty gerahs. ⁴⁸ Give to Aaron and his sons the money by which the excess number of them is redeemed. ⁴⁹ So Moses took the redemption money from those who were over and above those redeemed by the Levites; ⁵⁰ from the firstborn of the Israelites he took the money, one thousand three hundred and sixty-five shekels, reckoned by the shekel of the sanctuary; ⁵¹ and Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons, according to the word of the Lord, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Numbers 3:44-51

So Moses took the redemption money from those who were over and above those redeemed by the Levites. It is not clear how the two hundred and seventy three individuals were selected as being those not redeemed by the Levites. However, it is clear from other passages of Scripture that they would have been

willing paid the price of redemption as it would be used to pay for the work of the Levites in the tabernacle. Paul writes on this theme: <<***We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness***>> (Romans 12:6-8), and: <<***Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver***>> (2 Corinthians 9:7).