



Numbers - Chapter Four

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

I.c Numbers 3:1-4:49 - Two censuses of the Levites (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

All Levites between 30 and 50 years old were responsible for moving the tabernacle from campsite to campsite. This chapter specifies what each Levitical clan must do (vv.3-33), and then records their number (vv.34-49). The instructions presuppose that the reader can visualise the tabernacle and its furniture. For a full description of the tabernacle, refer to Exodus Chapters 25-31 and the various comments made on the website.

I.d.ii Numbers 4:1-49 - Census of mature Levites

Refer to the chapter summary above.

I.d.ii.1 Numbers 4:1-20 - The Kohathites

The Kohathite priests handle the most holy items of the tabernacle, such as the ark, lampstand, and altars, but the non-priestly Kohathites are not even to look at them, lest they die. If someone sees the face of God they will die, even the great man Moses: <<***But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live'***>> (Exodus 33:20), and because these items share this intense divine holiness, they could prove equally lethal (vv.17-20). For this reason, only the priests may wrap these pieces of sacred furniture. Notice that different-coloured cloths are used for different items, symbolising their different degrees of holiness.

The ark, being most holy, was wrapped in three layers, the veil, goatskin, and blue cloth (vv.5-6). The next most holy item, the table, had three layers with goatskin on the outside, and the golden altar and lampstand had two layers (vv.7-11).

When the priests had wrapped the items, they were given to the Kohathites to carry, either on poles or on a carrying frame. A Hittite document from the Second Millennium BC provides an analogy to OT texts that describe the work of Levites and priests, in that it describes two classes of people who watch over and take care of the temple: a priestly class and a non-priestly class. People in the latter group serve as aides to the former group.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ² Take a census of the Kohathites separate from the other Levites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ³ from thirty years old up to fifty years old, all who qualify to do work relating to the tent of meeting. ⁴ The service of the Kohathites relating to the tent of meeting concerns the most holy things.

Numbers 4:1-4

Take a census of the Kohathites separate from the other Levites. Among the males of the family of Kohath, only those between thirty and fifty were allowed to actually do the work of the sanctuary. In some ways, this was thought to be the prime of a man's life, combining both wisdom and physical strength, and God wanted the best from the family of Kohath. Jesus was in his thirties during the time of his three year ministry: <<*Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli*>> (Luke 3:23).

All who qualify to do work relating to the tent of meeting. This probably relates to able bodied men. Anyone with a disability, physical or mental, would have been barred from coming into God's presence by law. This may not seem right in today's thought processes of political correctness but it was a fact at the time. The sacrificial death of Christ now makes it possible for all who believe in him to enter the presence and service of God: <<*Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen*>> (Jude 24-25).

⁵ When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the screening curtain, and cover the ark of the covenant with it; ⁶ then they shall put on it a covering of fine leather, and spread over that a cloth all of blue, and shall put its poles in place. ⁷ Over the

table of the bread of the Presence they shall spread a blue cloth, and put on it the plates, the dishes for incense, the bowls, and the flagons for the drink-offering; the regular bread also shall be on it; ⁸ then they shall spread over them a crimson cloth, and cover it with a covering of fine leather, and shall put its poles in place. ⁹ They shall take a blue cloth, and cover the lampstand for the light, with its lamps, its snuffers, its trays, and all the vessels for oil with which it is supplied; ¹⁰ and they shall put it with all its utensils in a covering of fine leather, and put it on the carrying-frame. ¹¹ Over the golden altar they shall spread a blue cloth, and cover it with a covering of fine leather, and shall put its poles in place; ¹² and they shall take all the utensils of the service that are used in the sanctuary, and put them in a blue cloth, and cover them with a covering of fine leather, and put them on the carrying-frame. ¹³ They shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it; ¹⁴ and they shall put on it all the utensils of the altar, which are used for the service there, the firepans, the forks, the shovels, and the basins, all the utensils of the altar; and they shall spread on it a covering of fine leather, and shall put its poles in place. ¹⁵ When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, as the camp sets out, after that the Kohathites shall come to carry these, but they must not touch the holy things, or they will die. These are the things of the tent of meeting that the Kohathites are to carry.

Numbers 4:5-14

When the camp is to set out. On the way to the Promised Land, the tabernacle furniture would have to travel and be carried great distances. But first, it must be packed properly to ensure its safe travel. Since the furniture itself was holy, it had to be covered and packed by Aaron and the priests before the sons of Kohath could come forward to carry it.

¹⁶ Eleazar son of Aaron the priest shall have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain-offering, and the anointing-oil, the oversight of all the tabernacle and all that is in it, in the sanctuary and in its utensils.

¹⁷ Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ¹⁸ You must not let the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites. ¹⁹ This is how you must deal with them in order that they may

live and not die when they come near to the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in and assign each to a particular task or burden.²⁰ But the Kohathites must not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment; otherwise they will die.

Numbers 4:15-20

As the camp sets out, after that the Kohathites shall come to carry these, but they must not touch the holy things, or they will die. The Kohathites were forbidden to touch any of the tabernacle furniture; it was made with poles that one could use to carry the furniture without touching the item itself. This is what happened to Uzzah when he tried to steady the ark as it was being transported to Jerusalem: <<*The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God*>> (2 Samuel 6:7)

Eleazar son of Aaron the priest shall have charge of the oil for the light. Eleazar, the eldest surviving son of Aaron the high priest, supervised the work of the Kohathites.

I.d.ii.2 Numbers 4:21-33 - The Gershonites and Merarites

This section specifies the curtains of the tabernacle that the Gershonites are to carry. They were to be transported in two ox carts (Numbers 7:7).

The Merarites had to transport the planks, poles, bases, etc. These items, being heavier and bulkier than the curtains, required four ox carts (Numbers 7:8).

²¹ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ²² Take a census of the Gershonites also, by their ancestral houses and by their clans; ²³ from thirty years old up to fifty years old you shall enrol them, all who qualify to do work in the tent of meeting. ²⁴ This is the service of the clans of the Gershonites, in serving and bearing burdens: ²⁵ They shall carry the curtains of the tabernacle, and the tent of meeting with its covering, and the outer covering of fine leather that is on top of it, and the screen for the entrance of the tent of meeting, ²⁶ and the hangings of the court, and the screen for the entrance of the gate of the court that is around the tabernacle and the altar, and their cords, and all the equipment for their service; and they shall do all that needs to be done with regard to them. ²⁷ All the service of the Gershonites shall be at the command of Aaron and his sons, in all that they are to carry, and in all that they have to do; and you shall assign to their charge all that they are to carry. ²⁸ This is the service of the

clans of the Gershonites relating to the tent of meeting, and their responsibilities are to be under the oversight of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest.

Numbers 4:21-28

This is the service of the clans of the Gershonites. They had oversight of the coverings of the tabernacle; the skins and artistically woven designs that made up the walls and the roof of the tent; they did this under the supervision of Aaron's son Ithamar.

²⁹ As for the Merarites, you shall enrol them by their clans and their ancestral houses; ³⁰ from thirty years old up to fifty years old you shall enrol them, everyone who qualifies to do the work of the tent of meeting.

³¹ This is what they are charged to carry, as the whole of their service in the tent of meeting: the frames of the tabernacle, with its bars, pillars, and bases, ³² and the pillars of the court all around with their bases, pegs, and cords, with all their equipment and all their related service; and you shall assign by name the objects that they are required to carry. ³³ This is the service of the clans of the Merarites, the whole of their service relating to the tent of meeting, under the hand of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest.

Numbers 4:29-33

As for the Merarites, this is what they are charged to carry, as the whole of their service in the tent of meeting. They had the job of packing and transporting the boards and pillars of the tabernacle; this was important work, because of all the precious metals used, the weight of the tabernacle was some 19,000 pounds or 8,600 kgs.

You shall assign by name the objects that they are required to carry. This work was not voluntary nor could individuals pick and choose what work they wanted to do. Moses and Aaron assigned to each man by name the items he must carry. With such valuable cargo, and such long distances to travel, it was an important job to do. Presumably as individuals died or became too old to perform their allotted task then another named individual would take over their role.

Again, Aaron's son was given the responsibility for overseeing the work: under the hand of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest.

I.d.ii.3 Numbers 4:34-49 - Census of the Levites

Levites between 30 and 50 years old totalled eight thousand five hundred and eighty, just over a third of their total number of twenty two thousand (Numbers 3:39). This chapter again shows preparations being made for the march into Canaan. It underlines once again the dangerous holiness of God: he cannot be approached casually. It also emphasises the importance of the ministry of the Levites, who make possible the transport of the tabernacle to the land and who guard it from intrusion.

³⁴ So Moses and Aaron and the leaders of the congregation enrolled the Kohathites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ³⁵ from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified for work relating to the tent of meeting; ³⁶ and their enrolment by clans was two thousand seven hundred and fifty. ³⁷ This was the enrolment of the clans of the Kohathites, all who served at the tent of meeting, whom Moses and Aaron enrolled according to the commandment of the Lord by Moses.

³⁸ The enrolment of the Gershonites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ³⁹ from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified for work relating to the tent of meeting — ⁴⁰ their enrolment by their clans and their ancestral houses was two thousand six hundred and thirty. ⁴¹ This was the enrolment of the clans of the Gershonites, all who served at the tent of meeting, whom Moses and Aaron enrolled according to the commandment of the Lord.

⁴² The enrolment of the clans of the Merarites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ⁴³ from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified for work relating to the tent of meeting — ⁴⁴ their enrolment by their clans was three thousand two hundred. ⁴⁵ This is the enrolment of the clans of the Merarites, whom Moses and Aaron enrolled according to the commandment of the Lord by Moses.

⁴⁶ All those who were enrolled of the Levites, whom Moses and Aaron and the leaders of Israel enrolled, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ⁴⁷ from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified to do the work of service and the work of bearing burdens relating to the tent of meeting, ⁴⁸ their enrolment was eight thousand five hundred and eighty. ⁴⁹ According to the commandment of the Lord

through Moses they were appointed to their several tasks of serving or carrying; thus they were enrolled by him, as the Lord commanded Moses.

Numbers 4: 34-49

According to the commandment of the Lord through Moses. This census was commanded by God and had a definite purpose in his plan.

They were appointed to their several tasks of serving or carrying. Each of these had a role to play in doing the work of the tabernacle, and God made them all dependent on each other to do that work. Paul says the church is to work like a body with many parts, looking different, doing different jobs, meeting different needs, some more visible, some less, but all essential and all with the same DNA code. Much trouble is caused in the service of the Lord by those who desire a different calling than they have, or who are jealous of those who have a different calling, or by those who exalt one calling and abase another. Everyone has a place and a job, and all can set themselves to do it.