

Numbers Chapter 4

Verses 1-49

This chapter's census serves quite a different purpose from that in chapter 3.

It is designed to distribute the work of dismantling, transporting, and erecting the tabernacle among the different Levitical clans.

The work was dangerous, because it involved handling sacred equipment, which was heavy.

Therefore, it was restricted to men who were of sober outlook and physically strong.

Men between the ages of 30 and 50 were chosen.

For a discussion of the tabernacle and contents (see notes on Exodus chapters 25-30).

Verses 1-20

The Kohathites were entrusted with the care of the "Most Holy Things".

These included the two altars (Exodus 29:37; 30:10), and the ark, the table, the lampstand, and all their utensils (Exodus 30:26-28).

But they were not allowed to pack and unpack these items.

Aaron and his sons had to do this, because if the Kohathites had looked upon these Holy Things or uncovered them, they would have died (verses 5-20; compare 1 Sam. 6:19-21; 2 Sam. 6:6-7).

Implied in these two censuses are two principles:

- (1) Every member of the people of God had his part to play (1 Cor. 12:4-6).
- (2) Israel was a hierarchy and a theocracy with God at the top, followed by Moses and Aaron, who passed God's words on to the people.

The priests, Aaron's sons, obeyed their father and so on with the Levites on down.

Note the New Testament exhortation (in Hebrews 13:17), to "obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves" (compare 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; and 1 Peter 5:5).

Then note the admonitions to leaders to "command" (1 Tim. 4:11), and "rebuke with all authority" (Titus 2:15), for by adhering to scriptural teaching "thou shalt save both thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16).

Verses 1-3:

Hebrew priests began leading worship in the tabernacle at age 30 and ministered until age 50.

These requirements meant that of the 22,000 Levites, only about 8,600 were eligible for service, although the Levites did serve in various capacities at younger ages (8:24).

Numbers 4:1 "And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying,"

After they had taken the number of the Levites, and made an exchange of the firstborn of Israel for them.

And now they are ordered to number them a second time, and take out from them such as were fit for service.

This message is to Moses and Aaron, because this message speaks to them, as well as to the tribes.

Numbers 4:2 "Take the sum of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, after their families, by the house of their fathers,"

They were to begin with them first, and number them.

"After their families, by the house of their fathers":

As many as were of the age after mentioned.

And the reason why they began with Kohath, and not Gershon, the eldest son, as in the former numbering, was; not as Aben Ezra suggests.

Because of Moses and Aaron, who sprung from him, for that, if it had any strength in it, would have held good before.

But rather, as Chaskuni and others, because the Kohathites carried the ark and other Holy Things.

Though the true reason seems to be, because of the order observed in taking down the tabernacle, and removing the parts of it, and the things in it.

And it was most proper and reasonable, when they were about to take it down, first to take out the ark, table, etc.

Which was the business of the Kohathites to carry.

Next to take down the curtains, coverings, and hangings for the tabernacle and court, and the doors thereof, which were the charge of the Merarites.

Wherefore, in this order the sum out of each of them fit the business, for which was the reason to be numbered.

We saw earlier God separating out the Levites from among the 12 tribes of Israel.

Now, we see a further separation.

The tribe of Kohath is separated out for an even more specific calling from God.

The priests were Kohathites.

Now we see this tribe honored more than the others in service to God.

Numbers 4:3 "From thirty years old and upward even until fifty years old, all that enter into the host, to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation."

“Thirty ... until fifty”:

This second census of the Levites determined those who would carry the tabernacle on the coming journey to Canaan.

Only those between the ages of 30 and 50 were called by the LORD for this task (see note on 8:24).

Those who ministered were to begin when they were 30 years old, and serve the LORD in the tabernacle 20 years.

It is very interesting to me, that Jesus was 30 years old when He began His formal ministry.

At the age of 30, the Hebrews felt that a man became fully mature and could handle authority.

Verses 4-15

God specifically instructed the sons of Kohath (3:27-31), on how to move the “ark of Testimony” and care for its sacred implements.

They should first cover the ark with “badgers’ skins” (to protect it from rain), and a “blue” covering (perhaps representing heaven), and then insert “poles into its rings so the ark would rest on them as the priests carried it on their shoulders (7:9; Exodus 25:13).

The command, “They shall not touch any Holy Thing lest they die”, was later violated with disastrous results (2 Sam. 6:6-8).

The Kohathites carried the furnishings of the tabernacle only after they had been covered by Aaron and his sons.

If the Kohathites touched (4:15), or saw (4:20), any of the holy things, they would die.

Numbers 4:4 "This [shall be] the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation, [about] the most holy things:"

As what follows.

"About the most holy things":

Which Aben Ezra interprets only of the ark, which was indeed a Most Holy Thing.

And stood in the Most Holy Place.

But there were other Holy Things, in the care of which the service of the Kohathites lay.

As the showbread table, the candlestick, and the altars of incense and burnt offering.

And the vail, and the ministering: vessels, which Jarchi reckons with it, as more holy than all other things.

Only those who had been called of God for this purpose, could handle the Most Holy Things. Moses, Aaron, and Aaron's sons were all from the tribe of Kohath.

Numbers 4:5 "And when the camp setteth forward, Aaron shall come, and his sons, and they shall take down the covering veil, and cover the ark of testimony with it:"

Upon the cloud's removing and the trumpets blowing.

"Aaron shall come, and his sons":

Into the Holy Place.

"And they shall take down the covering veil":

The vail that divided between the Holy and the Most Holy Place, which covered all in the Holy of Holies out of sight.

"And cover the ark of testimony with it":

Together with the mercy seat and cherubim on it, that they might not be seen nor touched by the Levites when they carried them.

Now though the High Priest himself might not go into the Most Holy Place but once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

Yet on this occasion, when the tabernacle was to be taken down, and the things in it to be removed, both he and his sons might enter without danger.

Since, as Bishop Patrick observes, the divine Majesty was gone from thence in the cloud which gave the signal for the motion of the camp, and the taking down of the tabernacle.

It appears that even the veil, which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place, could only be touched by Aaron and His sons who had been consecrated for this holy work.

It appears the ark must be covered with this veil, to keep it from view.

Numbers 4:6 "And shall put thereon the covering of badgers' skins, and shall spread over [it] a cloth wholly of blue, and shall put in the staves thereof."

Not that which covered the tabernacle, for that was committed to the Gershonites (Num. 4:25).

But a covering made of these on purpose for the present use, to preserve the ark from rain and dust.

And this covering was put not immediately upon the ark, but upon the other coverings that were over the ark, and so preserved the veil as well as the ark.

"And shall spread over it a cloth wholly of blue":

It is a matter of question, whether this was over the covering of badgers' skins also.

If over the latter, as one would think it should be, by the order of the text, how could that be a shelter from the rain and dust, which seems to be the use of it?

And therefore, should be the outermost, as one of the same kind was the outermost covering of the tabernacle.

Aben Ezra observes, there were some that say it was over the covering of badger's skin.

But it is right in mine eyes, says he, that it was spread over the covering vail.

If indeed it was for the sake of honor and dignity, the first is right.

But the badger's skin was on account of rain and dust:

"And shall put in the staves thereof":

Having been removed while the ark was covering, as Aben Ezra observes.

Or otherwise they always remained in their rings, and were never taken out (Exodus 25:14).

But on this occasion they might, and then be put in again for the carrying of the ark, which was the use of them.

Though he also remarks, that there are some that say the sense is, they put the staves on the shoulders of them that carried it, which is not a despicable sense.

Unless rather it is to be understood of putting the staves through holes made in the coverings of the ark, and disposing and fitting them in them, for the better carriage of it.

The badgers' skins would keep it dry and protected from damage.

It appears the blue cloth was to be the outer covering.

The blue covering showed its heavenly origin.

Numbers 4:7 And upon the table of showbread they shall spread a cloth of blue, and put thereon the dishes, and the spoons, and the bowls, and covers to cover withal: and the continual bread shall be thereon:

That also might not be seen nor touched by the Levites.

"And put thereon the dishes, and the spoons, and the bowls, and covers to cover withal":

All which belonged to the showbread table.

The use of which (see notes on Exodus 25:29).

These seem to be put not immediately upon the table, but upon the blue cloth spread over the table.

"And the continual bread shall be thereon":

The showbread is called "continual", because it was always on the table.

For while the one was removing by a set of priests, which had stood a week, new loaves were placed by another set of priests.

This bread seems at this time to be placed also upon the table, spread with the blue cloth.

And from hence it appears, that the Israelites had the showbread in the wilderness.

For the making of which they might be supplied with corn from the neighboring countries, though they themselves needed not any, being daily fed with manna.

The things in the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were not to be open to public view, even as they travelled.

Again, the blue cloth let the world know these things were of a heavenly nature.

Numbers 4:8 "And they shall spread upon them a cloth of scarlet, and cover the same with a covering of badgers' skins, and shall put in the staves thereof."

Upon the dishes and other vessels belonging to the showbread table, and on the showbread itself.

"And cover the same with a covering of badgers' skins":

This was clearly the outward covering, and seems to confirm the observation made in (see Numbers 4:6).

That the same sort of covering was the outermost covering of the ark.

"And shall put in the staves thereof":

Which belonged to the table, and were made to carry it with on occasion, from place to place (see Exodus 25:27).

And the same phrase being used as here of the staves of the ark in (Num. 4:6).

Seems to confirm the sense of them there, that they were taken out and put in upon this occasion, though otherwise fixed.

"Scarlet" had to do with red, and showed the Bread provided life.

The badger skins were to protect from the elements.

The staves were put through rings, so the bearers would not touch the Holy Things.

They just carried them by the staves.

Numbers 4:9 "And they shall take a cloth of blue, and cover the candlestick of the light, and his lamps, and his tongs, and his snuffdishes, and all the oil vessels thereof, wherewith they minister unto it:"

Which had lamps in it, and were continually lighted, and gave light in the Holy Place.

"And his tongs, and his snuffdishes, and all the oil vessels thereof, wherewith they minister unto it":

By supplying the lamps with oil, and snuffing and trimming them.

These were all Holy Things.

The "candlestick" and the "Light" therein symbolized the Light of Jesus.

The blue was to keep the world away from the Holy Things.

Numbers 4:10 "And they shall put it and all the vessels thereof within a covering of badgers' skins, and shall put [it] upon a bar."

Which here also was the outermost covering.

The ark and the showbread table had three coverings, but the candlestick only two.

They being more sacred than that, especially the ark.

"And shall put it upon a bar":

The word "mot" perhaps signifies a kind of mat or mattress, on which the candlestick and its vessels, bundled together in the covering of the badgers' skins, were laid and carried between men on staves.

The Hebrew word signifies an instrument made of two staves or bars.

And so, the Septuagint render the word "staves"; as does the Targum of Onkelos.

This is the same as the verses above.

The badgers' skins were slick, and could turn water.

They were placed on the bar for handling, so the bearer would not be in direct contact with the holy things.

Numbers 4:11 "And upon the golden altar they shall spread a cloth of blue, and cover it with a covering of badgers' skins, and shall put to the staves thereof:"

The altar of incense, which was overlaid with gold, and therefore called a golden one.

To which the allusion is in (Rev. 8:3).

"And cover it with a covering of badgers' skins":

After the cloth of blue was spread upon it.

"And shall put to the staves thereof":

Into the rings, both made to bear and carry it, upon occasion, from place to place.

Numbers 4:12 "And they shall take all the instruments of ministry, wherewith they minister in the sanctuary, and put [them] in a cloth of blue, and cover them with a covering of badgers' skins, and shall put [them] on a bar:"

The garments in which the priests, ministered in the sanctuary.

Which were laid up in proper places, and which they only wore when in service.

"And put them in a cloth of blue, and cover them with a covering of badgers' skins":

All wrapped up in one bundle.

"And shall put them on a bar":

The same sort of carriage on which the candlestick and its vessels were borne (see notes on Numbers 4:10).

Again, the instruments of ministry and the golden altar must be treated with holy care.

They again are covered in blue, and then covered with the slick skin to keep them dry.

Numbers 4:13 "And they shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth thereon:"

Having cleared the Holy of Holies, and the Holy Place, they were to come forth from thence into the court of the tabernacle.

Where stood the altar of burnt offering, which is here meant, and on which sacrifices being daily burnt.

There were always ashes to be removed.

And which at this time was highly necessary to be done, when the tabernacle was taken down, and all belonging to it to be carried away.

And though no mention is made of the fire, which was always burning on it, it was doubtless preserved.

And care was taken for the carrying it along with the altar, or in a separate vessel from it.

Bishop Patrick supposes it might be carried upon the grate.

This purple cloth speaks of royalty.

This possibly, is speaking of separating the ashes from the live coals.

The altar fire was never to be put out completely.

Leviticus 6:13 "The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out."

The altar covered with this purple cloth symbolizes the great sacrificial offering of Jesus for all of us.

John 19:2 "And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put [it] on His Head, and they put on Him a purple robe,"

Numbers 4:14 "And they shall put upon it all the vessels thereof, wherewith they minister about it, [even] the censers, the fleshhooks, and the shovels, and the basins, all the vessels of the altar; and they shall spread upon it a covering of badgers' skins, and put to the staves of it."

Upon the altar covered with a blue cloth.

On that were to be put everything belonging to the altar.

"Wherewith they minister about it":

The priests, when they offered sacrifice on it.

"Even the censers, the fleshhooks, and the shovels, and the basins, all the vessels of the altar":

Of which see (Exodus 27:3).

"And they shall spread upon it a covering of badgers' skins":

To prevent the rains falling upon them, which being all of brass, would be apt to tarnish.

"And put to the staves of it":

Which were made to bear and carry it on such an occasion as this (Exodus 27:6).

No mention is made of the laver, though there is both in the Septuagint and Samaritan versions, which add, "and they shall take a purple cloth and cover the laver, and its base.

And shall put it into a covering of skin of a blue color, and put it upon bearers.

But perhaps the reason why this is not mentioned is, because it was carried uncovered.

The mystery of which, Ainsworth conjectures, was this.

That it might be a lively representation of the grace of God in Christ.

Continuing and opened as an ever springing fountain, where always God's elect, having faith in him, may wash and purge themselves in the blood of Christ unto forgiveness of sin sanctification of the Spirit, and salvation (see Zech. 13:1).

These are the instruments used in conjunction with the altar.

Not only is the altar holy, but everything that touches it as well.

Numbers 4:15 "And when Aaron and his sons have made an end of covering the sanctuary, and all the vessels of the sanctuary, as the camp is to set forward; after that, the sons of Kohath shall come to bear [it]: but they shall not touch [any] holy thing, lest they die. These [things are] the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation."

Not the Holy Place, nor the Most Holy Place, for these were not covered by them.

But "the Holy Things" in them, as the Septuagint version.

The ark, showbread table, etc., and all "the vessels of the sanctuary".

All appertaining to those Holy Things, which are before mentioned.

Jarchi interprets the "sanctuary", or the "holiness", of the ark and altar.

"And all the vessels of the sanctuary":

Of the candlestick and the instruments of ministry.

"As the camp is to set forward":

Which made the covering of them necessary, in order to their being carried as that moved.

"After that, the sons of Kohath shall come to bear it":

Or rather them, all the Holy Things, and their vessels, and that upon their shoulders.

"But they shall not touch any Holy Thing":

Even in bearing them.

Neither the ark nor any other, only the staves and bar, on which they were carried.

"Lest they die":

By the immediate Hand of God.

"These things are the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation":

The above things, the ark, etc., which they were to bear on their shoulders.

And not make use of wagons to carry them.

We see from this, that only Aaron and his sons can touch these Holy Things, even to wrap them for travel.

The actual carrying is done by other members of the tribe of Kohath.

They just pick up the staves and carry it with the staves.

If they touch any of the things other than the staves to carry it with, they will surely die.

Verses 16-20

Special instructions were given regarding Eleazar's duties and also the preservation of the "Kohathites".

Numbers 4:16 "And to the office of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest [pertaineth] the oil for the light, and the sweet incense, and the daily meat offering, and the anointing oil, [and] the oversight of all the tabernacle, and of all that therein [is], in the sanctuary, and in the vessels thereof."

The following things, to bear them, according to some Jewish writers.

But rather it was to give the oil for the light, that is, the vessels.

And so, the vessels of the oil to the sons of the Kohathites.

Agreeably to which are the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan, who paraphrase the words, "and that which was delivered to Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, the oil for the light, etc."

And indeed the words, as they are in the Hebrew text, may be rendered, "and the oversight of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, shall be, or "let it be", the oil for the light, etc."

He had the inspection of these, and on him lay to see to it, that these were carried by the Kohathites.

The oil for the light of the lamps in the candlestick; see (Exodus 27:20).

"And the sweet incense":

To burn on the altar of incense (Exodus 30:34).

"And the daily meat offering":

Offered with the lambs morning and evening (Exodus 29:40).

"And the anointing oil":

With which Aaron and his sons were anointed, the tabernacle and all its vessels (Exodus 30:23).

"And the oversight of all the tabernacle, and of all that therein is, in the sanctuary, and in the vessels thereof":

The former, the oil for the light, etc., were his immediate oversight and care.

But the oversight of these by his brother Ithamar, according to the Jewish writers.

Eleazar had a very important calling, next to his father Aaron's calling.

He was to fuel the light, to see that it never went out.

Again, this light symbolizes the "Light" of the world (Jesus Christ).

His power is never diminished.

The "sweet incense" symbolizes the prayers of the saints that rise to heaven.

The "anointing oil" symbolizes the Holy Spirit of God.

Then we can safely say, that Eleazar cared for the spiritual things of the temple.

Next to Aaron, he was the overseer.

Numbers 4:17 "And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying,"

And gave them a very solemn and awful charge about this affair of the Kohathites, it being a very hazardous one they were employed in.

Numbers 4:18 "Cut ye not off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from among the Levites:"

Or give no occasion, as the Targum of Jonathan says.

Or be not the cause of their cutting off, as Jarchi.

Through negligence or inadvertency of theirs, in packing up the above things, and delivering them to them.

Even though they were set aside for special service, the Kohathites were to still be part of the Levitical tribe.

The tribe of Levi was small compared to the other tribes of Israel.

The Kohathites were an even smaller group of the Levites.

Numbers 4:19 "But thus do unto them, that they may live, and not die, when they approach unto the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in, and appoint them every one to his service and to his burden:"

As after directed.

"That they may live, and not die":

Live long, and not die a sudden and violent death.

"When they approach unto the Most Holy Things":

The ark, the showbread table, etc.

To take them up and carry them.

"Aaron and his sons shall go in":

Into the Holy and Most Holy Places.

"And appoint them in everyone to his service and to his burden":

What everyone shall do, and how they shall take them up, and bear them.

All of the Levitical tribe was chosen of God for work in the ministry.

The only difference was that the High Priest, Aaron, and his sons, the priests, were the only ones of the tribe to handle the holy and the Most Holy Things.

Even they could not touch them unless it was for the purpose of carrying out God's wishes pertaining to them.

For a Levite, who was not a priest or the High Priest to touch these Holy Things, would mean certain death.

This must be seen from the spiritual standpoint as well.

The High Priest is like the great High Priest Jesus Christ.

It also sometimes is speaking of the leader of the church.

The "priests" symbolize all believers in Christ.

The world, or worldly people, do not have that close association with the Lord that the Christians and their leaders do.

Numbers 4:20 "But they shall not go in to see when the holy things are covered, lest they die."

They were not to be present while they were packing up, lest they should see any of them with their eyes.

They were not to go in until they were quite covered out of sight.

Which may signify the hiding of the mysteries of grace in those things under the former dispensation.

When even the Levites themselves were not admitted to a sight of them (see Eph. 3:4).

"Lest they die":

By the immediate hand of God.

The holy vessels and the ark were hidden from public view at all times.

Curiosity seekers could die looking at the Most Holy Things.

In the following Scriptures, you can see the seriousness of this type of breaking in to see God, or the ark.

Exodus 19:21 "And the LORD said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish."

1 Samuel 6:19 "And He smote the men of Beth-shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even He smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten [many] of the people with a great slaughter."

Numbers Chapter 4 Questions

1. God had separated the Levites from the other tribes of Israel, in this lesson He is separating the _____ out of the Levites.
2. What were the ages of those separated out to work for God?

3. The author found that it was very interesting that Jesus was _____ years old, when He began His formal ministry.
4. Why was this age chosen for the time to begin to minister?
5. What tribe was Moses and Aaron from?
6. Who were the only ones who could touch the Holy Things?
7. Who took the veil down for traveling?
8. What was the ark covered with for travel?
9. What kept the ark dry?
10. Why did they use a blue cloth to cover it?
11. What did they put over the table of showbread?
12. The things from the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were not open to _____.
13. What did the "scarlet" covering symbolize?
14. How were the bearers to carry these Holy Things?
15. What did the "candlestick" and the "Light" symbolize?
16. The purple cloth speaks of _____.
17. What will happen if some of the sons of Kohath, other than Aaron and his sons, touch the instruments directly?
18. What is under supervision of Eleazar?
19. What does this perpetual "Light" in verse 16 symbolize?
20. What does the "sweet incense" symbolize?
21. What does the "anointing oil" symbolize?
22. What did God tell Moses and Aaron not to do, in verses 17 and 18?
23. Who were the only ones allowed to touch the holy things?
24. Who do the "priests" symbolize?