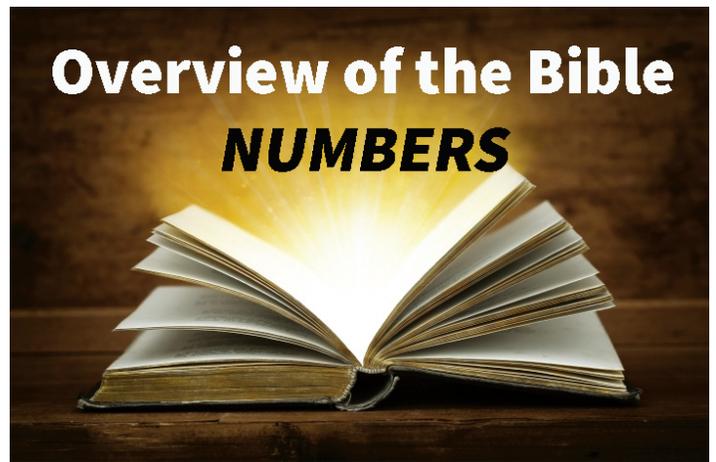


NUMBERS:
Numbers 3-5 – Lesson 27
Wednesday, November 18, 2020



Two Levitical Censuses (3-4)

Most of the content in these two chapters is devoted to a description of the numbers and duties of the Levites. But even before readers encounter the results of the first census, they are greeted with a reminder of Aaron's two sons Nadab and Abihu, who *"died before the Lord when they offered unholy fire before the Lord...and they had no children"* (3:4). There is a right way to worship the Lord, an infraction of which brings disastrous consequences for both laity (1:51) and clergy (3:4).

But that is not all. Two more times in ch. 3 the ominous threat of execution for trespass in the worship of God is highlighted: *"Anyone else who comes near shall be put to death"* (vv. 10, 38). The Israelites, including the Levites, were to know what they must do and must not do, and they were not to confuse the two. Otherwise, they must accept the consequences.

Why were there two Levitical censuses (3:14-39; 4:1-49)? Actually, the two are quite distinct from one another. A clue in discerning the distinction is found in the first census in 3:15: *"Number the sons of Levi...every male from a month old and upward."* By contrast, the second census includes those *"from thirty years old and up to fifty years old"* (4:3). Thus, the first census starts with those in infancy and is open-ended, while the second is limited to those falling within the twenty years from age thirty to fifty.

Might we assume, then, that the Levites included in the first census are being earmarked for service that will be lifelong? Thus, there is no age restriction? On the other hand, the second census includes Levites who are to be inducted into a ministry for which there is a time restriction: the twenty years after adolescence and young manhood, and before the beginning of advanced age.

The text itself affirms the reason for the limitation of service in Numbers 4. Here it is physical labor that is being described. Specifically, it involves assembling, dismantling, and carrying the tabernacle. It is not wide of the mark to translate the word *"service/work"* (4:3, 23, 24, 27, 30, 31, 33, 35, 39, 43, 47) as *"strenuous physical labor."* For the reason of retirement age is prescribed, fifty, and a startling age is prescribed, thirty. It is interesting that the minimum age in ch. 1 for eligibility to serve in the army is twenty, but in ch. 4 the minimum age for eligibility to serve as a Levite in the sanctuary is thirty. Ten more years of maturation are required for those who would enter the Lord's service as opposed to those who would enter the Lord's army.

The responsibilities are threefold and are divided among the sons of Levi. The responsibilities for the Kohathites are spelled out in 4:4-20. They have the special distinction of carrying *"the holy things"* of the tabernacle (vv. 15, 19). For that reason, two extra items are added. First, the chapter says that the actual work of dismantling these most sacred parts of the tabernacle is the responsibility of Aaron and his sons, not the Kohathites at all (vv. 5-14). The Kohathites are transporters, not dismantlers.

Second, they give the injunction force, it is noted that the Kohathites will die (vv. 15, 18, 20) if they overstep their boundaries. At least so far, Numbers seldom has missed the opportunity to inject, in the midst of statistical reports and work assignments, the somber note of consequences of disobedience. God, in his holiness, will have it no other way.

The second group of Levites is the Gershonites (vv. 21-28). Their work is primarily to carry the tabernacle curtains, or at least to stand guard by the wagons on which the curtains are carried. Absent here is any note, as with the Kohathites, that they operate under priestly directive or that usurpation is a capital offense.

The third group of Levites is the Merarites (vv. 29-33). Like the Gershonites, they stand guard over a portion of the tabernacle carried on wagons. This time the material is the wooden frames and pillars.

One can see that the Kohathites have the greatest privilege. They also have the greatest responsibilities.

Keeping the Camp Holy (5)

Numbers began by devoting two chapters to the laity in Israel (1-2). Two chapters were given to the clergy, the Levites (3-4). Now there is a return, for two more chapters, to the laity (5-6), in each section of which the clergy play a significant role. They deal with impurity concerns (5:1-4); they may be the beneficiary of the restitution, in the absence of family, for someone against whom sin was committed (5:5-10); they officiate at the ritual of a wife suspected of adultery (5:11-31); they play a major role in the life of a Nazirite, especially as he or she prepares to exit that office (6:1-21); and they prayerfully bless the people (6:2-27).

The first four chapters have underscored the sanctity of the tabernacle, either in place assignment or in role assignment. It is God's dwelling place, and all is to be observed and implemented as he has spoken. It is not without significance that the first four chapters all end on the same note: *"Thus did the people [or Moses] according to the word of the Lord, as the Lord commanded"* (1:54; 2:34; 3:51; 4:49).

The first four chapters have been positive: this is where you station yourself; this is what you are supposed to do. By contrast, Numbers 5 is negative in its emphasis. It deals with putting out of the camp those who defile it or detract from its sacred character. Thus, the leper is banned (Lev. 13:46), as is the one with any kind of a discharge. To be sure, the person is not executed, put to death like a Kohathite, but is exiled from the community.

Only with the knowledge of a stipulation like this is one able to appreciate fully Jesus' actions in *"touching"* a leper (Mk. 1:41).

If certain types of physical impurities defile God's camp (5:1-4), what then of deliberate sin and its effects? This question is addressed by 5:5-10.

The third paragraph in the chapter (vv. 11-31) continues the theme of the maintenance of holiness among God's people. Here the issue is alleged/actual adultery by a wife. The husband suspects her infidelity but there were no witnesses, nor was the wife apprehended in an embarrassing situation.

The previous paragraph had discussed actual sin between two people. This paragraph discusses potential sin between two spouses. One item that connects 5:5-10 with 5:11-31 is that both deal with unfaithfulness, unfaithfulness to God in 5:6 and unfaithfulness to one's spouse in 5:12. In both cases the Hebrew expresses an act of infidelity with *maal*, which carries the idea of committing sacrilege against or breaking faith with someone.

Perhaps some concerns arise from the paragraph. However, far from dehumanizing the woman by making her accountable to every whim of an insecure husband, the procedure urges just the opposite. Actually, the ritual is a ploy in her favor—it proposes that the husband *"put up or shut up."* Is he as suspicious of his wife's integrity; the truth one way or the other.