

NUMBERS

Chapter 3

The Sons of Aaron

These are the generations 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 serve as priests. 4 But Nadab and Abihu died before the LORD when they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children. So Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests in the lifetime of Aaron their father.

3:1–4 *generations*. Leaders of the Levites are briefly reintroduced. Cf Lv 8–10 for their consecration and history. (TLSB)

3:1 *Aaron and Moses*. At first glance, the names seem out of order, but the emphasis is correct: It is the family of Aaron that is about to be described (see v. 2). (CSB)

3:3 *anointed priests*. Ex 28:41 records God’s command to Moses to anoint his brother Aaron and his sons as priests of the Lord (see Ex 30:30; Lev 8:30). By this solemn act they were consecrated in a special way to the Lord. Kings (1Sa 16:13) were also anointed with oil for special service to God. Physical objects could be anointed as well (see Ge 28:18; Ex 29:36). The Hebrew term for “anointed” (*mashiah*) later became the specific term for the Messiah (Christ). (CSB)

ordained. The Hebrew for this word means lit. “fill the hand of” (see Ex 32:29). By this act there was an investing of authority, a consecration and a setting apart. (CSB)

3:4 *unauthorized fire*. Or “strange fire.” This seems to be a deliberately obscure expression, as though the narrator finds the very concept distasteful. They were using fire that the Lord had not commanded (see Lev 10:1). Proximity to God’s holiness requires righteousness and obedience from his priests. For all time, the deaths of Aaron’s newly consecrated sons serve to warn God’s ministers of the awesome seriousness of their tasks (cf. 1Sa 2:12–17, 22–25, 27–36; 3:11–14; 4:1–11). For similar divine judgments at the beginning of new stages in salvation history see Jos 7; 2Sa 6:7; Ac 5:1–11. (CSB)

3:1–4 Aaron’s sons are set apart to serve as God’s high priests. They would be the anointed leaders of the tabernacle and later the temple, down to the first century, when Herod’s temple was destroyed in AD 70. Although Aaron’s oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, offended the Lord and were consumed by fire, in His mercy God raised up new, faithful leaders in Aaron’s younger sons. Today, pray for the leaders of your congregation and community, that they may walk in the ways of the Lord. He will hear your prayer for Jesus’ sake and lead you into a blessed future. • Merciful Father, lead us always by Your Son, who is ever faithful. Amen. (TLSB)

Duties of the Levites

5 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 6 “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. 7 They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. 8 They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at

the tabernacle. 9 And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. 10 And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.” 11 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 12 “Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, 13 for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD.” 14 And the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying, 15 “List the sons of Levi, by fathers' houses and by clans; every male from a month old and upward you shall list.” 16 So Moses listed them according to the word of the LORD, as he was commanded. 17 And these were the sons of Levi by their names: Gershon and Kohath and Merari. 18 And these are the names of the sons of Gershon by their clans: Libni and Shimei. 19 And the sons of Kohath by their clans: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel. 20 And the sons of Merari by their clans: Mahli and Mushi. These are the clans of the Levites, by their fathers' houses. 21 To Gershon belonged the clan of the Libnites and the clan of the Shimeites; these were the clans of the Gershonites. 22 Their listing according to the number of all the males from a month old and upward was[a] 7,500. 23 The clans of the Gershonites were to camp behind the tabernacle on the west, 24 with Eliasaph, the son of Lael as chief of the fathers' house of the Gershonites. 25 And the guard duty of the sons of Gershon in the tent of meeting involved 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 door of the court that is around the tabernacle and the altar, and its cords—all the service connected with these. 27 To Kohath belonged the clan of the Amramites and the clan of the Izharites and the clan of the Hebronites and the clan of the Uzzielites; these are the clans of the Kohathites. 28 According to the number of all the males, from a month old and upward, there were 8,600, keeping guard over the sanctuary. 29 The clans of the sons of Kohath were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle, 30 with Elizaphan the son of Uzziel as chief of the fathers' house of the clans of the Kohathites. 31 And their guard duty involved the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the vessels of the sanctuary with which the priests minister, and the screen; all the service connected with these. 32 And Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest was to be chief over the chiefs of the Levites, and to have oversight of those who kept guard over the sanctuary. 33 To Merari belonged the clan of the Mahlites and the clan of the Mushites: these are the clans of Merari. 34 Their listing according to the number of all the males from a month old and upward was 6,200. 35 And the chief of the fathers' house of the clans of Merari was Zuriel the son of Abihail. They were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle. 36 And the appointed guard duty of the sons of Merari involved the frames of the tabernacle, the bars, the pillars, the bases, and all their accessories; all the service connected with these; 37 also the pillars around the court, with their bases and pegs and cords. 38 Those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tent of meeting toward the sunrise, were Moses and Aaron and his sons, guarding the sanctuary itself, to protect[b] the people of Israel. And any outsider who came near was to be put to death. 39 All those listed among the Levites, whom Moses and Aaron listed at the commandment of the LORD, by clans, all the males from a month old and upward, were 22,000.

3:5–10 These commands are not followed by a report of obedience as were the commands in chs. 1–2, but further details are given in ch. 8. Clear distinctions are made here between the priestly house (the sons of Aaron) and the Levites. The latter were to be aides to the priests, and they served not only Aaron but the whole nation in the process (see vv. 7–8). (CSB)

3:7–10 *guard*. Priests did not guard the Lord in a merely militaristic sense but kept the services of His house and observed the proper usages of the sacred vessels. (TLSB)

3:6 *minister*. Hbr *sharath*, to serve by attending or waiting on someone. Description of the priests' role in offering sacrifices. (TLSB)

3:9 *give the Levites*. Priests led the Levites. (TLSB)

to him. It appears that the issue here is service to Aaron (and through him to the Lord); in 8:16 the service is to the Lord. (CSB)

wholly given. Levites were exempt from military duty to give full-time assistance to the priests. They humbly served the Lord as they served God's ordained representatives. The Lord always supplies His people with the gifts and abilities needed to support His mission, as Paul indicates in 1Co 12:27–31. The Lord expects His people to use the gifts He gives to their full potential, and He gives them the strength to do so (cf 1Co 4:2). (TLSB)

3:10 *guard their priesthood*. Levites could not rise in rank to priesthood. (TLSB)

put to death. Changing God's established order was punished severely, just as the Lord had severely punished the priests Nadab and Abihu for changing the order of sacrifices (TLSB)

anyone outsider. Lit. "stranger"—anyone lacking authorization. Service at the tabernacle may be performed only at the express appointment of the Lord. The words of v. 10 follow the paragraph telling of the death of Aaron's sons. They were authorized persons, but used unauthorized means. If the sons of Aaron were put to death at the commencement of their duties, how dare an unauthorized person even think to trespass? See v. 38; 18:7. (CSB)

3:12 *instead of*. An example of the practice of substitution. (CSB)

The Lord always claims the firstborn of His people (cf Gn 4:4). The substitution of the Levite firstborn reminded Israel of the firstborn of Egypt, who died to secure their freedom (Ex 11:5; 13:11–16), foreshadowing the sacrifice of God's only-begotten Son to liberate the world from bondage to sin, death, and hell (Lk 2:7; Rm 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; 12:23; Rv 1:5). Luth: "The entire Levitical priesthood points to Him and indicates that He would be a King and Priest entirely different from those of the past or future" (AE 13:228). Animals were also offered to the Lord in recognition of His claim to Israel's firstborn and to point toward the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus (Heb 13:11–12; cf 1Jn 1:7b). (TLSB)

3:15 *a month old or upward*. The counting of the Levites corresponds to that of the other tribes in chs. 1–2, except that all males from the age of one month, rather than from 20 years, were to be counted. The Levites were not being mustered for war, but for special service in the sacred precincts of the Lord. (CSB)

Not just those who were old enough for military duty (cf 1:17–18). (TLSB)

3:16–39 The three "sons of Levi" and their immediate descendants are listed first (vv 17–20). Names are repeated as each of the three major groups is counted, assigned a place in the camp, and given its general area of responsibility. Tasks are described in greater detail in ch 4. (TLSB)

3:16 *as he was commanded*. The obedience of Moses to the Lord's command is explicit and total. (CSB)

3:21–38 The words of 1:53, "their tents around the tabernacle of the Testimony," are detailed by the four paragraphs in this section: (1) Gershon to the west (vv. 21–26); (2) Kohath to the south (vv. 27–32); (3) Merari to the north (vv. 33–37); (4) Moses and Aaron and sons to the east (v. 38). The other tribes

began with the most favored: (1) Judah on the east (2:3); (2) Reuben on the south (2:10); (3) Ephraim on the west (2:18); (4) Dan on the north (2:25). The Levitical clans lead up to the most favored. The leaders of the Levitical houses correspond to the leaders of the other tribes. As do the names of the other tribal leaders, these names include a form of God's name. (CSB)

3:21–26 *Gershonites*. Guards and caretakers for the structural coverings of the tabernacle (vv 25–26). (TLSB)

3:24 *Eliasaph*. Means "(My) God has added." (CSB)

Lael. Means "belonging to God." (CSB)

3:25–26 There were three curtains or covering screens for the tabernacle: (1) at the gate of the courtyard (v. 26; 4:26); (2) at the entrance to the Tent (vv. 25, 31; 4:25); (3) between the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place (4:5). (CSB)

3:27–32 *Kohathites*. Guards and caretakers of the furnishing of the sanctuary (v 31). (TLSB)

3:27 *Amramites*. Aaron was an Amramite (see Ex 6:20); thus he and Moses were from the family of Kohath. To the Kohathites was given the care of the most holy things (see 4:4–18). (CSB)

3:28 8,600. The total number of Levites given in v. 39 is 22,000—300 less than the totals of 7,500 Gershonites (v. 22), 8,600 Kohathites (here) and 6,200 Merarites (v. 34). Many believe that a copyist may have made a mistake here, and that the correct number is 8,300. (CSB)

3:30 *Elizaphan*. Means "(My) God has protected." *Uzziel*. Means "My strength is God." (CSB)

3:33–37 *sons of Merari*. Guards and caretakers of the structural framework of the tabernacle (v 36). (TLSB)

3:35 *Zuriel*. Means "My Rock is God." *Abihail*. Means "My (divine) Father is power." (CSB)

3:38 *on the east*. The most honored location, but Moses and Aaron were placed there for a representative ministry (on behalf of the Israelites). *Anyone else ... was to be put to death*. Service in the tabernacle was an act of mercy, a means for the people to come before God. Yet it was marked by strict discipline—it had to be done in God's way. The sovereignty of God was evident in his limitations on the means to approach him (see v. 10; 1:51; 18:7). (CSB)

3:39 22,000. Totals in vv 22, 28, and 34 (7,500; 8,600; 6,200) equal 22,300 Levite males. There is a possible scribal error in v 28, where the loss of a letter would change the figure from 8,300 to 8,600. (TLSB)

3:5–39 The Lord chooses the Levites to assist the sons of Aaron, His anointed priests. Each Levitical clan performs assigned duties for the care and security of the sanctuary (tent of meeting) and its precious contents (vv 25, 31, 36–37). Just as the Lord consecrated the Levites to care for the tabernacle and to support the services of the sanctuary, He likewise calls and consecrates His people today to support the ministry of the Word. The Lord has a place for you to serve among His people. Rejoice in the mutual love and care He provides for all in Christ Jesus. • O God, by Your grace through Christ, You have made us Your temple. Bless our service together in spreading the Word of salvation to all nations. Amen. (TLSB)

Redemption of the Firstborn

40 And the LORD said to Moses, “List all the firstborn males of the people of Israel, from a month old and upward, taking the number of their names. **41** And you shall take the Levites for me—I am the LORD—instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the people of Israel.” **42** So Moses listed all the firstborn among the people of Israel, as the LORD commanded him. **43** And all the firstborn males, according to the number of names, from a month old and upward as listed were 22,273. **44** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **45** “Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle. The Levites shall be mine: I am the LORD. **46** And as the redemption price for the 273 of the firstborn of the people of Israel, over and above the number of the male Levites, **47** you shall take five shekels[c] per head; you shall take them according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel of twenty gerahs[d]), **48** and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are over.” **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 people of Israel he took the money, 1,365 shekels, 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 commanded Moses.

3:41 *I am the LORD.* What is being commanded conforms to God’s character as Yahweh. (CSB)

3:43 22,273. Seems too small for a population in excess of 2,000,000, and is used as an argument for attempting to find a means of reducing the total number of the people (calculations based on this number suggest a total population of about 250,000). Some suggest that the 22,273 firstborn of Israel were those born since the exodus, all the firstborn at the time of the exodus having already been set apart for the Lord at the first Passover (see Ex 12:22–23). This, however, creates a new problem since nowhere is that allegedly distinct group assigned any special service of the Lord. See Introduction: Special Problem. (CSB)

The number of firstborn males in Israel nearly matched the number of Levite males (v 39), who were consecrated to the Lord’s service and thereby “paid” the redemption price for the whole nation. (TLSB)

3:40–51 According to the Law, the firstborn sons belong to the Lord (Ex 34:20). In their place, God appoints the Levites and allows for the redemption of all firstborn Israelite sons, foreshadowing redemption through Christ (Heb 9:12). • Lord, You provided our redemption through the blood of Your Son, Jesus. We praise You for His generous sacrifice. Amen. (TLSB)