

# NUMBERS

## Chapter 3

### *The Levites*

This is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the LORD talked with Moses on Mount Sinai. <sup>2</sup> The names of the sons of Aaron were Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. <sup>3</sup> Those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests, who were ordained to serve as priests. <sup>4</sup> Nadab and Abihu, however, fell dead before the LORD when they made an offering with unauthorized fire before him in the Desert of Sinai. They had no sons; so only Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests during the lifetime of their father Aaron. <sup>5</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>6</sup> "Bring the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest to assist him. <sup>7</sup> They are to perform duties for him and for the whole community at the Tent of Meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle. <sup>8</sup> They are to take care of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle. <sup>9</sup> Give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to him. <sup>10</sup> Appoint Aaron and his sons to serve as priests; anyone else who approaches the sanctuary must be put to death." <sup>11</sup> The LORD also said to Moses, <sup>12</sup> "I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, <sup>13</sup> for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether man or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD." <sup>14</sup> The LORD said to Moses in the Desert of Sinai, <sup>15</sup> "Count the Levites by their families and clans. Count every male a month old or more." <sup>16</sup> So Moses counted them, as he was commanded by the word of the LORD. <sup>17</sup> These were the names of the sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari. <sup>18</sup> These were the names of the Gershonite clans: Libni and Shimei. <sup>19</sup> The Kohathite clans: Amram, Izhar, Hebron and Uzziel. <sup>20</sup> The Merarite clans: Mahli and Mushi. These were the Levite clans, according to their families. <sup>21</sup> To Gershon belonged the clans of the Libnites and Shimeites; these were the Gershonite clans. <sup>22</sup> The number of all the males a month old or more who were counted was 7,500. <sup>23</sup> The Gershonite clans were to camp on the west, behind the tabernacle. <sup>24</sup> The leader of the families of the Gershonites was Eliasaph son of Lael. <sup>25</sup> At the Tent of Meeting the Gershonites were responsible for the care of the tabernacle and tent, its coverings, the curtain at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, <sup>26</sup> the curtains of the courtyard, the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, and the ropes—and everything related to their use. <sup>27</sup> To Kohath belonged the clans of the Amramites, Izharites, Hebronites and Uzzielites; these were the Kohathite clans. <sup>28</sup> The number of all the males a month old or more was 8,600. The Kohathites were responsible for the care of the sanctuary. <sup>29</sup> The Kohathite clans were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle. <sup>30</sup> The leader of the families of the Kohathite clans was Elizaphan son of Uzziel. <sup>31</sup> They were responsible for the care of the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the articles of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use. <sup>32</sup> The chief leader

of the Levites was Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest. He was appointed over those who were responsible for the care of the sanctuary.<sup>33</sup> To Merari belonged the clans of the Mahlites and the Mushites; these were the Merarite clans.<sup>34</sup> The number of all the males a month old or more who were counted was 6,200.<sup>35</sup> The leader of the families of the Merarite clans was Zuriel son of Abihail; they were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle.<sup>36</sup> The Merarites were appointed to take care of the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts, bases, all its equipment, and everything related to their use,<sup>37</sup> as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs and ropes.<sup>38</sup> Moses and Aaron and his sons were to camp to the east of the tabernacle, toward the sunrise, in front of the Tent of Meeting. They were responsible for the care of the sanctuary on behalf of the Israelites. Anyone else who approached the sanctuary was to be put to death.<sup>39</sup> The total number of Levites counted at the LORD's command by Moses and Aaron according to their clans, including every male a month old or more, was 22,000.<sup>40</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "Count all the firstborn Israelite males who are a month old or more and make a list of their names."<sup>41</sup> Take the Levites for me in place of all the firstborn of the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites in place of all the firstborn of the livestock of the Israelites. I am the LORD."<sup>42</sup> So Moses counted all the firstborn of the Israelites, as the LORD commanded him.<sup>43</sup> The total number of firstborn males a month old or more, listed by name, was 22,273.<sup>44</sup> The LORD also said to Moses,<sup>45</sup> "Take the Levites in place of all the firstborn of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites in place of their livestock. The Levites are to be mine. I am the LORD."<sup>46</sup> To redeem the 273 firstborn Israelites who exceed the number of the Levites,<sup>47</sup> collect five shekels for each one, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs.<sup>48</sup> Give the money for the redemption of the additional Israelites to Aaron and his sons."<sup>49</sup> So Moses collected the redemption money from those who exceeded the number redeemed by the Levites.<sup>50</sup> From the firstborn of the Israelites he collected silver weighing 1,365 shekels, according to the sanctuary shekel.<sup>51</sup> Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons, as he was commanded by the word of the LORD.

**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); see NIV text note on Mt 1:17. (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** *Nadab and Abihu.* See Lev 10:1–3 and notes. (CSB)

Cf Lv 10:1–7; 1Ch 24:1–2; Nu 20:25. (TLSB)

*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)

**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.* See NIV text note. 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 else.* 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)

**3:12–13** See note on Ex 13:2. *mine.* Repeated for emphasis. (CSB)

**3:12** *in place of.* An example of the practice of substitution (see Ge 22:13 and note; Mt 20:28). (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 more.* 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 (see note on 1:5–

16). 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." *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 (see NIV text note). (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** *toward the sunrise*. 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)

**3:41** *I am the LORD.* What is being commanded conforms to God's character as Yahweh ("the LORD"; see note on Ex 3:14). (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)