

Exegetical Notes, Numbers 4:1-20

“Holy Things”

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Numbers 4:1-20

Verse 1-3

YHWH said to Moses and Aaron: "Take a census of the Kohathite branch of the Levites by their clans and families. Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting."

- Now, Moses and Aaron are instructed to count the number of Kohathites who are able to serve in the work they will do in the Tent of Meeting.

Verse 4-6

"This is the work of the Kohathites in the Tent of Meeting: the care of the most holy things. When the camp is to move, Aaron and his sons are to go in and take down the shielding curtain and cover the ark of the Testimony with it. Then they are to cover this with hides of sea cows, spread a cloth of solid blue over that and put the poles in place."

- The Kohathites are given charge over the "MOST HOLY THINGS." These things are Israel's most sacred objects. They are the furnishings which are inside the Tent of Meeting. While these things are put into the charge of the Kohathites, the Kohathites may not touch (verse 15) or even look on them (verse 20).
- The ark of the Testimony, also known as the Ark of the Covenant, is the place where God was enthroned. It is Israel's most holy object.
- First, Aaron, the High Priest, and his sons, Israel's priests, covered the ark with the curtain which separated the Holy Place from the most Holy Place. Then they put the skins of "sea cows," manatees, over the curtain to keep the ark dry. This was then covered with a decorative cloth of pure blue. Then the poles were put in place so that the ark could be carried without being touched.

Verse 7-15

“Over the table of the Presence they are to spread a blue cloth and put on it the plates, dishes and bowls, and the jars for drink offerings; the bread that is continually there is to remain on it. Over these they are to spread a scarlet cloth, cover that with hides of sea cows and put its poles in place. They are to take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand that is for light, together with its lamps, its wick trimmers and trays, and all its jars for the oil used to supply it. Then they are to wrap it and all its accessories in a covering of hides of sea cows and put it on a carrying frame. Over the gold altar they are to spread a blue cloth and cover that with hides from sea cows and put its poles in place. They are to take all the articles used for ministering in the sanctuary, wrap them in blue cloth, cover that with hides of sea cows and put them on a carrying frame. They are to remove the ashes from the bronze altar and spread a purple cloth over it. Then they are to place on it all the utensils used for ministering at the altar, including the firepans, meat forks, shovels, and sprinkling bowls. Over it they are to spread a covering of hides of sea cows and put its poles in place. After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But they must not touch the holy things or they will die. The Kohathites are to carry those things that are in the Tent of Meeting.”

- These instructions are very detailed and elaborate. The priests must prepare the objects inside the Tent by covering them specifically as commanded. The objects are hidden from view so that only the priests will see them. They are carefully given poles or frames so that they could be lifted without being touched by the Kohathites. When the priests have finished covering the holy objects, the Kohathites are brought in to carry them.

Verse 16

“Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, is to have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering and the anointing oil. He is to be in charge of the entire tabernacle and everything in it, including its holy furnishings and articles.”

- Eleazar is named "priest in charge" when it was time to move the Tent of Meeting.

Verse 17-20

YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, "See that the Kohathite tribal clans are not cut off from the Levites. So that they may live and not die when they come near the most holy things, do this for them: Aaron and his sons are to go into the sanctuary and assign to each man his work and what he is to carry. But the Kohathites must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die."

- To protect the Kohathites from mishandling the holy things, the priests are instructed to prepare the objects for the Kohathites to carry. God's specific instructions must be followed or the Kohathites will die.

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