

NUMBERS

Lesson 3 - Chapters 2 and 3

We were finishing up Numbers chapter 1 last week when we ran out of time. And the subject was the tribe of Levi (the Levites), who were assigned to become the priestly tribe of Israel who would be set-apart from this already set-apart nation of Israel for their especially holy task. Yet to understand HOW Levi was set-apart is just as critical as the fact that they were set-apart.

Historically and Scripturally the Levites were adopted away from Israel (no longer to be counted as Israelites); they were adopted away en masse from Israel by God. This very much corresponds to the pattern of an earlier surprise adoption that we studied back in Genesis 48. Let's review that for just a minute or two.

READ GEN. 48:1 - 6

Here, for some reason that we're not told, Jacob (called Israel) adopts Joseph's two sons away from Joseph (recall that Joseph was Jacob's most favored son). Jacob makes Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's two sons, his own sons. In other words these 2 grandchildren of his have their status changed to being Jacob's sons. A strange thing indeed and we're left to ponder it's meaning. But here in Numbers we find Yehoveh do precisely the same thing to Israel: He adopts away from Israel the entire tribe of Levi to be His own special servants.

So get the picture: Ephraim and Manasseh should have been clans from the tribe of Joseph. Instead because they were adopted, they are now elevated from being potential clans into the status of being their own tribes: 2 tribes of Jacob (Israel). Levi on the other hand is no longer to be counted as a tribe of Israel; rather it has been removed as a tribe of Israel and is now the tribe of God so to speak. It's important in deciphering all that happens from here forward in the Bible that we recognize and understand the impact of this separateness of Levi from Israel.

And here we get an all-important spiritual principle that completely flies in the face of the modern world. A principle that if most even understood it, would be denounced as the most intolerant and arrogant position a person might harbor. And it is this: God separates His servants away from everyone else, elevates them, has higher expectations of them, and gives them special attention. They are different. It is Yehoveh who gives them different status; it is has not come because of anything they've done to merit such favor but because God has declared it so. His servants (Levi) are so special that they are not even to be counted as among everyone else of his special set-apart nation, Israel. This is all connected to the first important God-principle I ever taught you a long time ago: God divides, elects, and separates. He makes distinctions. This is not a God who says we're all one big happy family. He does

NOT view everyone the same and is NOT tolerant or politically correct in order to suit our ever-changing vanities and preferences.

Are you a true Believer and Disciple of Yeshua? Then that hit song from so many years ago, "We are the World" doesn't apply to you at all. YOU, by the blood of Jesus, have been separated away from all other humans. The Lord has given you elevated status and favor. YOU are the modern spiritual equivalents of Levites (NO, you have not become physical Levites). What did YOU ever do to merit this favor? Nothing. You simply accepted the reality of what Yeshua HaMashiach did for you.

Therefore, my brethren, YOU are not to be counted as among the others on this planet. YOU are not to behave as others among this planet. In fact YOU have been assigned the duty as the guardians of God's holiness here on earth. For YOU are God's earthly tabernacle, and some mysterious element of His holiness that we call the Holy Spirit, the Ruach HaKodesh, actually dwells inside of you. Everywhere you are, He is. Everything you experience, you subject Him to and cause Him to react accordingly. Therefore as God's servant you are NOT to join yourself willingly to anyone or anything who is not **also** set apart for God. And you are NOT to allow anyone or anything who is not set apart for Yehoveh to join themselves to you if you have any control over the matter.

The Levites were set apart for holiness and now you're set apart for holiness. Period, end. That's the deal and your only real choice if you don't accept this role and duty is to renounce your allegiance to Jesus. Now just as the Levites didn't go off and live ENTIRELY separately from the Israelites, we're not to live entirely separately from the world. Yet the Levites were given their own cities AMONG the other tribes of Israel so they could be near and serve their divine function in helping to shepherd Israel and in helping to keep Israel in proper relationship with God. In fact the Levites not only served God directly at the Tabernacle via officiating the required sacrifices and other rituals, they served Him **indirectly** by serving Israel.

As Believers we are to serve God directly. But as Jesus said, we're also to serve Him indirectly. And, how do we do that? **NAS Matthew 25:37** *"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? 38 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39 'And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 'And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'*

We serve Him, by serving others (ESPECIALLY our brothers and sisters of the faith) at His direction. The parallels between the Levites and we Disciples of Yeshua, whether Jew or gentile, are so thorough and far reaching that we cannot ignore them and then claim to have real knowledge of membership in the Kingdom of God. So as we continue our study of Torah pay very close attention to what God expected of the Levites; most of its principles apply to you.

I'm not going to go into detail for the moment but let me tell you one of the reasons that Yehoveh separated the Levites from all else on this earth and made them His own: it has to do

with the principle that all firstborns automatically belong to Him. God had set down a principle in Exodus that the lives of the firstborn of everything were His. When He took the lives of all those people AND livestock in Egypt He killed ONLY the firstborn; He was simply taking what was already His, the firstborn.

But now with the taking of the Levites away from their biological father Jacob, the Lord is substituting the Levites as a ransom for all the firstborn of all the other tribes of Israel. Instead of God owning the lives of all the firstborn of Israel, He has exchanged them for the Levites. Just accept that for the moment even though I've not fully explained it, and in the next few weeks we'll look at this principle is much greater depth.

Let me finish out that thought with another parallel between the Levites and Believers. The Levites were to protect God's holiness from encroachers. Because if an unauthorized person (someone God deemed as unfit) encroached on God's holiness, the entire community would feel His wrath. And who were deemed as the unfit? All whom did God not deem as holy.

The Levites in protecting God's holiness at the same time protected the common people of Israel from God's wrath by keeping those who were not sufficiently holy away from Him. If the non-holy were able to get near God's holiness, His wrath would fall upon the entire community in divine retribution. Likewise one of the purposes of Believers is to delay God's wrath upon the unholy; the world. The day will come when **all** Believers will be whisked away from this earth in an event Evangelicals call the Rapture, and THEN God's wrath will pour out upon this planet. It is a major part of YOUR purpose as a walking, talking, living, breathing tabernacle of God to protect this world from God's wrath by protecting God's holiness from uncleanness and unholiness of the world. As long as we're here He's here. When we're gone He's gone. Now if that responsibility doesn't make your knees quake and your mouth go dry, then you either don't believe me or you don't get it. All that stood between the total annihilation of Israel and God was the Levites. All that stands today between the total annihilation of the world and God, is YOU.

I don't want to leave this too quickly. Let me explain something to you: the Levites weren't like pacifist monks who would plead with an encroacher to stay back and then if the encroacher paid no heed the Levites would behave as Gandhi or silent sacrificial lambs. The Levites were armed and dangerous; they immediately killed anyone who encroached too near the holy grounds. This was not about justice as we think of it. Sympathy was irrelevant. Simple error brought death as quickly as stubborn determination and malicious intent. Remember in Genesis the word picture of the Cherubim with the flaming sword that guarded the path to the Garden of Eden? And that any unauthorized person foolish enough to ventured too close was immediately destroyed by those Cherubim? The Levites were to behave as those Cherubim behaved. The Levites didn't ask permission to kill the trespasser, they were expected to do it without hesitation; they didn't arrest an encroacher and take them to a priest for a hearing, the Levite was obligated to kill that person on the spot or lose their own life for not doing so. God's holiness is that serious of a matter. God indeed places high value on human life; but He also places the ULTIMATE value on His own holiness. And the Scriptures make it clear that He would sacrifice ALL human life to maintain His holiness.

As Believers we need to do our job, just as the Levites did theirs; and it was for the benefit of both worshipper and the pagan. But this job can't be done while sitting on the sidelines. Now obviously we're not in the business of killing unholy people. But as guardians of God's holiness we are to be active and watchful and strike at the true enemy, Satan, whenever He comes near. And we do this by standing on God's Word and by following Him no matter the cost. This must never be a frivolous or rash action on our part, nor something we act upon without much prayer and council.

Let's move on to Numbers chapter 2.

READ NUMBERS 2 all

The organizing of the nation of Israel for the coming Holy War continues. And the Israelites are given instructions on how they are to set up camp and deploy when they are at rest. Let's remember that out in the wilderness the Israelites didn't move all that often. They stayed in one location for many months at a time (years in some cases) before they were led by the Shekinah of the fire cloud to move again. So when they set up an encampment it wasn't for a weekend of recreational tent camping. Rather than have some type of disorganized mess it was necessary to have order. And the claimed enormity of 2-3 million people meant that the organization and structure had to be even more precise and codified than if this were but a few people. Not surprisingly a fairly rigid hierarchy is laid out for the Israelites.

Of utmost importance is that they are to set up their vast tent village around the Holy Sanctuary. A kind of square formation would be set up with each division consisting of 3 tribes assigned a particular place. And that place was designated by compass directions east, west, north, and south.

Why a square? Why the Wilderness Tabernacle in the center? Well despite the obvious reasons that by means of the people surrounding the Tabernacle it was better protected we also find that historically Rameses II used this exact formation during his battle campaigns. The royal tent of Pharaoh was placed in the protected middle and certain battalions were assigned in a kind of pecking order around the tent. These Israelites who had spent generations in Egypt, were completely familiar with this method.

I only bring this up to make the point that, generally speaking, God deals with us using manners and ways that we are familiar with in our culture. Most of the rituals God gave to Israel, and the form the Laws and ordinances were presented in (even the use of the Menorah, and of burnt offerings, and of burning incense, and of circumcision, and so on) had some parallel already long existent in the Middle Eastern societies. We mustn't think that Yehoveh kept up some steady barrage of instructing the Israelites about things, and in ways, that were completely foreign to them and totally new to the world. No. There was no need for this. Centuries of civil customs had been developed and God used many those imperfect customs for His purposes. For Israel some of the customs He changed, some He outlawed, and some He gave a profoundly different meaning.

The point is that most of what Israel did, they did because it was already well known to them.

That said over the centuries of following God's ways and better understanding God's purposes for them, Israel's customs did begin to look very different from other folks. Their ways became stranger and stranger to the rest of the world and indeed that DOES appear to be God's plan for His people.

We as Yeshua's disciples are to operate the same way. When we get redeemed (saved) we still live in houses. We wake up in the morning and go to jobs. We put on shoes and wear clothes. We drive cars. We still read newspapers. The speed limits remain the same, we still have to pay our taxes, we vote and continue using electricity. We eat with a knife and fork and we read books. Externally we were saved INSIDE the environment and culture we were familiar with. And usually we'll make our kingdom journey with Yehoveh inside the culture we were familiar with before we submitted to Him. And God will also likely send us to do His bidding inside the same society we knew before we were redeemed. When we're first redeemed usually ALL the change is internal. It's over time (if it's like my life, LONG periods of time) that the internal changes begin to show up externally. So eventually we start looking pretty strange to the world, and the world looks even stranger to us. Or we start appearing to the world as a threat to their hopes and aspirations as we move from being perceived as merely obnoxious to being an enemy. That was how it was for Israel then and (if you don't recognize it) how it is for us now.

Verse 2 makes it explicit that the 12 tribes are to camp around the Tent of Meeting AT A DISTANCE. It is too dangerous to be too near. And using common phrases of that day it next says that each Israelite is to camp **with his unit** (that is, within his battle group) **not** the badly mistranslated "with his standard" as we usually see written. So each Israelite is to camp with the battle unit he belongs to as determined by the census, and above his unit is to fly a banner representing his unit. Now this banner was some kind of colored cloth with the insignia of the group emblazoned upon it. Most of the Targums and the Talmud agree that each of the 12 tribes had a distinctive banner incorporating a specific color and that the color of each banner coincided with one of the 12 semi-precious stones that adorned the High Priest's breastplate. Just what the insignia amounted to that was on each banner is anyone's guess; nothing has been preserved that tells us with any certainty. So whatever set of symbols for each tribe of Israel that you might see in a book, they are but guesswork and tradition.

The order of the tribes (or, more literally as they're called here, troops) is that Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun encamps together as a unit on the east side (the front) of the Wilderness Tabernacle. This is the prime position of honor. Judah is the leader of this 3-tribe division. Judah obtained this right to lead because Judah replaced Reuben (who was the natural firstborn of Jacob (Israel)) due to an indiscretion by Reuben against Jacob.

Reuben, although he no longer holds the preeminent position as firstborn and therefore supreme leader of Israel, still is a leader and is apparently second in command to Judah. And so he is instructed to camp in the next most prestigious area the south side of the Tabernacle. Let me say here that when I call a tribe by name and say "he" that is not to say that the man Reuben, for instance, was still living. He had died long, long ago and as we saw in the record of the census there was a fellow named Elizur who currently was the head of the Reuben tribe. The only thing that remained of the original sons of Jacob by this late date was their

descendants and their names that continued on as the names of the tribes they fathered.

So the leader of the tribe of Judah held the highest status with the leader of the tribe of Reuben as the 2nd highest.

Reuben camped with Simeon and Gad, and together those 3 formed the Southern division.

Next, to the west, was Ephraim as the head of its division and it camped together along with Manasseh and Benjamin.

Lastly, in the least prestigious position, the North was the division led by Dan. Those with him were Asher and Naftali.

Now these camping positions (arranged according to compass directions) also dictated marching order: that is who marched in the lead, who followed next and so on down to who brought up the rear. The Division of Judah would lead the column followed by Reuben. Verse 17 then tells us that after the Division of Reuben, but before the next division (which was Ephraim), the Wilderness Tabernacle was to be carried. In other words the Levites, carrying and protecting the all important tent shrine, were to be smack dab in the middle of the marching column. Bringing up the rear was the Division of Dan.

Now can we ascertain just why certain tribes were designated to camp together in a particular group, a division? Yes there is some rationale and pattern to it. To the East were composed of what is called the Leah tribes. That is the biological mother of Judah and the other two tribes he camped with was Leah. To the South we find 3 more Leah tribes; however there is a slight difference. The leader of the Southern Division, Reuben, was the biological son of Leah as was Simeon. But Gad was NOT a biological son of Leah; rather he was the son of Leah's handmaiden Zilpah. However by law Zilpah, as a servant, was but a surrogate mother for Leah so Gad was counted as among the sons of Leah.

To the West were the Rachel tribes led by Ephraim; that is these were all sons produced by Jacob's most loved wife, Rachel. Now again I have some explaining to do because although Benjamin's biological mother was indeed Rachel, Ephraim and Manasseh, the other two tribes making up this division, did NOT have Rachel as a biological mother. So why are they called Rachel tribes? Because Rachel WAS the biological mother of Joseph, who was the biological father of Ephraim and Manasseh; and as Joseph's sons they were currently carrying the authority of Joseph, something that had been ordained by that amazing cross-handed blessing of Genesis 48. By the way we would think of it, biologically speaking Ephraim and Manasseh were GRANDSONS of Rachel. Nonetheless due to the customs of that era Benjamin was considered a son of Rachel and in the cross-handed blessing Jacob (Rachel's husband) had adopted Ephraim and Manasseh.

To the North (representing the lowest spot in the tribal pecking order) were the remaining 3 tribes, led by Dan. What made them the lowest is that they were all sons of Jacob's concubines (Leah's and Rachel's handmaidens). Dan and Naftali were sons of Bilah, and Asher the son of Zilpah.

What is important to see in all this is that Judah is the lead tribe and therefore has the highest status, and Dan is lowest. And that regardless of what we may view as fair, tribalism was brutal in its determination of rank and power and it was absolute and it was no different with Israel. The only hope for a lower ranking tribe was to somehow become more powerful than a tribe of higher rank and to either absorb that higher tribe or simply to become dominant over it. Keep this in mind as we watch the progress and development of Israel in the Old Testament because this was the context by which the ebb and flow of power was determined. In fact this is generally how tribal societies work to this day.

One other piece of information that I think you'll find helpful in understanding the Bible: east was the preeminent direction just as the "right" side was the preeminent side. So to understand why the compass directions that the various divisions camped at denoted rank, we begin at the East.

Picture yourself standing and facing east. If you hold out your right arm to the right side you'll be pointing in what direction? South. Therefore since East is rank #1 to the immediate right of East is rank #2, south. Now turn and face south. Hold out your right arm to your right side and you are now pointing where? West. Therefore that is rank #3. One more turn to the right and we're facing north, which is the last rank, rank #4.

This same protocol is used throughout the Bible. So always begin with east and work towards the right to understand the rank and order of compass directions, as each of these directions also symbolize rank and order of power and authority.

Let's go to Numbers chapter 3.

This chapter revolves around the census taken of the tribe of Levi. And, it is important to understand that the location of where this all took place is Mt. Sinai, up through verse 13, but then switches to a time during their Wilderness travels AFTER they loaded up and left Mt. Sinai beginning in verse 14. Let's read Numbers chapter 3.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 3 all

Biblically speaking genealogy is always important. And so the first verses of chapter 3 serve to elaborate on the genealogy of Moses and Aaron (but mainly Aaron). Actually other than the fact that Moses is Aaron's brother, none of the genealogy posted here applies directly to Moses.

Let me reiterate a principle that can get a little confusing but is essential to our understanding of the social structure of Israel so it's worth repeating: Aaron and his family were but one of the several major clans that composed the tribe of Levi. Even though there were several Levite clans Yehoveh assigned Aaron's clan with a holy status that was a notch above of other members of the tribe of Levi. Specifically only members of Aaron's clan could be the actual priests of Israel. All the other Levites were there to be servants and helpers to the priests; or perhaps more accurately, servants to the priesthood. Priests were the only ones who could conduct the rituals and ceremonies. The other Levite families had different duties; things like

guarding the Tabernacle and carrying it around, filling the water basins, cleaning up, stoking the fires, playing music, singing Psalms and so on.

So somewhat like the Levites were removed for service to God from the regular family of Israel (all the other tribes), the family of Aaron was removed from the regular family of Levi and given elevated status for the MOST SPECIAL service to God.

As for the High Priest (and there was ONLY one High Priest at a time) he was to come only from one specific son of Aaron, Eleazar. So the tribe of Levi was removed from Israel for Tabernacle service; the family of Aaron was removed from the Levites for priestly service; and from the family of Aaron one specific son was to provide to provide the ongoing line of High Priests. Dividing, separating, and electing.

In verse 2 we get the names of Aaron's sons and a sad reminder of the fate of two of them. The four sons are Nadav, Avihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Nadav was the first-born of Aaron. He would, under normal circumstances, have been the next High Priest after his father Aaron died; and then Nadav would have produced the line from which all future High Priests would have come. But Yehoveh killed Nadav and his brother Avihu in direct retaliation for their offering of "strange" or "alien" fire to the Lord. That is they were performing their priestly duties but ignored direct instructions about some ritual procedures and so the Lord engulfed them in flames and burned them up right before their father, Aaron's, eyes. Since Aaron's firstborn, Nadav, was dead and the 2nd born, Avihu, was also dead it fell to Eleazar to be next in line to be the future father of the High Priests.

Further it makes it clear that Nadav and Avihu's bloodlines died with them because they had no sons at the time of their deaths. Their family trees were cut down and their lines ended.

Now the next few verses, beginning with 5, defines the duties of the Levites (meaning the non-priests). And if you read this in English it is kind of hazy as to exactly what they're supposed to do. Most texts say something to the effect that 'they shall perform duties.....do the work of the Tabernacle.....a duty on behalf of the Israelites'.....etc.

In fact, the Hebrew makes the duties quite specific. In verse 7 what is usually translated as simply as "perform duties" is, in Hebrew, **shamar mishmereth**. And it means, "keep guard". So verse 7 should read, "They (the Levites) shall **keep guard** for him and for the whole community before the Tent of Meeting....". As we discussed earlier one of the primary assignments of the Levites were as guards of God's holiness and of His dwelling place.

Later on in that same verse where most translations say, "doing the work of the Tabernacle" (or something similar) the Hebrew used for "doing the work" is **abad bodah**. And this actually means, "doing heavy work". So the first duties assigned to the Levites are to **shamar mishmereth**, keep guard, and then to **abad bodah**, do the heavy work of the Tabernacle.

Verses 9 and 10 essentially put across the idea that the Levites are dedicated to do the blue collar tasks associated with the Tabernacle, and that they are to follow the directions of the priests.

Verse 11 begins a fascinating divine instruction that is almost lost to both Christianity and Judaism. This is an instruction that I stated to you last week and told you we'd get it into a little more later.....so here we are. And the instruction takes place in verses 11-13; it is that the Levites are to REPLACE the first-born of the other tribes of Israel. That is, whereby God in some special way regarded all the firstborn males of the tribes of Israel as special and set-apart for Him.....a kind of ownership or adoption by God.....NOW He has taken the Levites, in total, as His own in substitute of all the firstborns of Israel. That special status of Israelite firstborns as over and above the firstborns of other nations came about in Exodus 11, when the firstborns of Israel were commemorated to God as a remembrance of their Passover salvation.

We'll begin next week by discussing the replacement of the firstborn of Israel by the tribe of Levi.