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Redeeming the Firstborn

3: 5-13

Redeeming the firstborn DIG: What did it mean to be the firstborn in Bible times? What did it mean for Isra'el to be the firstborn of God? What does redeem mean? What is God's point in claiming all the firstborn? What would this teach the Israelites about Him?

REFLECT: Do you think ADONAI still requires our first and our best? In what sense do you give Him your first and best? If a redemption price were still required for your life or your children's lives, what would it be? What price has Yeshua paid on your behalf?

Because ADONAI had spared the firstborn of Isra'el, they belonged to Him.

The third and final counting in this parshah is the counting of **the firstborn males** and **animals** in **Isra'el**. The regulations for the counting can be seen in **3:40 (to see link click [At - The Census and the Redemption of the Firstborn](#))**. It is well known that **the firstborn male** in the ancient Near East enjoyed a unique status in the society. Both the TaNaKh and extra-biblical literature from the same general time period speak of a "right of the firstborn." The Torah speaks of **Isra'el** being **God's firstborn (Exodus 4:22)**. As such, **Isra'el** enjoys a unique position among the nations of the earth. Among the people of **Isra'el**, however, **the Holy One** also singled out even a more specific class of **firstborn, the firstborn males**. These were the ones to whom **Ha'Shem** had granted the grace of being spared death from the last plague when they were in Egypt. **God** took the life of every **firstborn**, even among **the animals**, except those who believed **Him** by sprinkling the blood of the Passover lamb upon the doorposts. To **them**, **YHVH** granted mercy and life.

Because **the LORD** granted special **firstborn** status to **Isra'el**, and especially to **Isra'el's firstborn males, God**, then, had a special right to **them (Exodus 22:29-30)**. **They** belong to **Him** in a way that others do not. Here, in our parashah, **ADONAI** is waving that right of possession and servitude by providing the tribe of

Levi as a substitute for **firstborn males**. Instead of individuals serving **Him**, a whole **tribe, the Levites**, was organized for the task.⁴¹

*Dear Heavenly Father, Praise **You** for mercifully making those who **love** and trust **You** as their **Savior**, to be part of **Your** family. **But whoever did receive Him, those trusting in His name, to these He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12)**. **You** graciously offer eternal **love** to all who **love** and fear **You**. **For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy for those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so ADONAI has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalms 103:11-13)**.*

*Having **You** as my loving Heavenly **Father** is a wonderful blessing and privilege. It is not a blessing to use only when I want something, rather it is a relationship of deep **love** that expresses itself when I choose to obey **You** with a cheerful heart. What a wonderful privilege it is to be in **Your** family, causing me to respond joyfully to **You** by loving **You** with all my **heart (Matthew 22:37)**. Just as **You** so graciously choose to put on human flesh and suffer the pain and shame as **the Lamb of God (John 1:29, Hebrews 12:2, Philippians 2:6-11)**, may I choose to serve **You** with a joyful heart, seeking always to live praising and blessing **You!** In **Your** holy name and power of **Yeshua's** resurrection. Amen*

Duties of the Levites (3:5-10): ADONAI said to Moshe, “**Bring the tribe of Levi near, and assign them to Aaron the priest, so that they can help him” (3:5-6)**. The family of **Aaron** were set apart especially to the duties of the priesthood. Each of these three families had its particular duties assigned. **The Kohathites** had charge of the sacred furniture of **the Tabernacle** (see the commentary on [the Life of David Et - The Kohathites](#)); **the Gershonites** took of the hangers and curtains (see [the Life of David Es - The Gershonites](#)); and **the Merarites** were required to look after the boards, sockets, pillars, pins and cords of **the Tabernacle** (see [the Life of David Eu - The Merarites](#)). The first **Levites** began **their** service at **thirty years** of age (**Numbers 4:23, 30 and 35**); but it was ordered after that the age for starting would be **twenty-five (Numbers 8:24)**. In **David's** time **they** began serving at **twenty (First Chronicles 23:24-27)**. **They** were released from service at age **fifty (Numbers 8:25)**. **Forty-eight cities** were set apart for **their** residence in **the Land**. **Six** of these were **cities of refuge** (see the commentary on [Deuteronomy Dm - Six Cities of](#)

Refuge).⁴²

These commands are not followed by a report of obedience, as were those in **Chapters 1 and 2**, but further details are given in **Chapter 8** (see **Bh - The Separation of the Levites**). Clear distinctions are made here between **the priestly** house of **Aaron** and **the Levites**. **The latter** were to assist **the priests** in **their** ministry. Thus, **the Levites** served not only **Aaron**, but the entire nation in the process. **The Levites were to carry out their duties and the duties of the whole community while performing the service of the Tabernacle. They are to be in charge of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting and to carry out all the duties of the people of Isra'el connected with the service of the Tabernacle (3:7-8).**

Interestingly, **Moses** is addressed in **verse 5**. **He** was responsible for **the nation** as a whole and, hence, for the faithful obedience of **the Levites** in **their** service of **the priestly** house of **Aaron**. Moreover, **the tribe** of **Levites** was to be **brought near (3:6)** . . . terminology for approaching **the Divine Presence**. Only **Moshe** had an open invitation to **draw near** to **YHVH** in a direct manner. Now **he** is presented with the task of **drawing** those other **ministers near** to **their** work before **the LORD**. That work consisted of service to **Aaron** and the guarding of the ministry related to **him**, and **the whole community (3:7)**. Moreover, **they** were responsible for the tasks of moving the furnishings of **the Tabernacle** when **it** would be on the move **(3:8)**.⁴³

Assign the Levites to Aaron and his sons (3:9a). **The Levites** were to assist **the priests** in their duties, as is made clear in this verse. **Their one responsibility in regard to the people of Isra'el is to serve Him (3:9)**. In this anticipatory passage (see **Ac - Numbers from a Messianic Jewish Perspective: Anticipatory Passages**) the fact that **the Levites** were to serve **the priesthood** (see the commentary on **Ezra-Nehemiah An - Priests, Levites and Temple Servants**) is clearly irrelevant to **their** census, but it anticipates that **Eleazar** would be **the chief of the Levitical guards (3:32)** and that **the Levites**, in general, were made subservient to **the priests (8:16 and 19; 18:3-4)**. Similarly, the remark that **Aaron and his sons were to carry out the duties of priesthood (3:10a)** remains vague until clarified in **18:7**.⁴⁴

Anyone else (Hebrew: *hazar*, meaning *the strange one, or anyone lacking authority*) **who involves himself is to be put to death (3:10b)**. The warning of **the death** penalty of **1:51** is repeated here. Service at **the Tabernacle/Temple**

could only be performed at the express command of **YHVH**. There is a special sadness in this verse as it follows the file reminding us of **the death of Aaron's sons (3:4)**. They were unauthorized persons and used unauthorized means or had an unauthorized attitude. If the sons of Aaron were put to death, how dare an unauthorized person even think to trespass. It seems that **the Levites** were the ones authorized to carry out **the death** penalty, to keep the wrath of **God** against sinful offenders from destroying the entire camp. **Chapter 25** presents a powerful example of this. But there the central figure was not a **Levite**, but **Phinehas**, son of Eleazar the High Priest (see [Ea - Taking a Stand for God](#)). Perhaps **the Levites** on that occasion were so lax that **Phinehas** decided **he** had to act quickly **himself** or there would not be time to quell the evil that was unashamedly before **them** at the entrance to **the Tabernacle**.⁴⁵

Redeeming the firstborn (3:11-13): In **Exodus**, **the LORD** commanded that all **the firstborn males** among **the children of Isra'el** must be **redeemed** (see the commentary on **Exodus Cd - Redemption of the Firstborn**). The commandment of **redemption** was directly tied to the Passover, and like the celebration of Pesach, it is meant to be a reminder of the **Exodus** from Egypt. **Because ADONAI had spared the firstborn of Isra'el, they belonged to Him. Their** salvation beneath the blood markings on the doorposts of **their** houses purchased **them** for **God's** service. As of **Numbers 3**, however, **the Israelites** had not yet **redeemed their firstborn sons**. And **they** couldn't enter the Promised Land unless **they** obeyed the commandment.



Now as **Isra'el** completed **her** preparations for leaving Mount Sinai and entering into the Promised Land, **the LORD** commanded them to carry out **the redemption** saying: **I have taken the Levites from among the people of Isra'el in lieu of every firstborn male that is first from the womb among the people of**

Isra'el; the Levites are to be Mine. All the firstborn males belong to Me, because on the day that I killed all the firstborn males in the land of Egypt, I separated for Myself all the firstborn males in Isra'el, both human and animal. They are Mine; I am ADONAI.” However, rather than paying the redemption price for their sons, they were to give the Levites over to the service of YHVH instead of their firstborn sons. The exchange was to be one for one. Each Levite male became a redemption price for the firstborn male from among the tribes. In that sense, **the Levites** were all redeemers. **Their** service on **Isra'el's** behalf was exchanged in place of the service of **the firstborn** of all the tribes. The lives of **the Levites** were given to **God** as a substitute for the lives of **the firstborn** of all the tribes (see [As - The Census and the Redemption of the Firstborn](#)). Again, we are amazed at the vivid Messianic implications. It is possible to purchase one life with the life of another. It is even possible to ransom a person before **ADONAI**.

The Levitical act of redemption on behalf of **Isra'el's firstborn** applied only to **the firstborn** of the **Exodus** generation. Subsequent generations of **firstborn** could not be redeemed by **the Levites** since **they** and **their** descendants were already in the service of **God**. After **Numbers 3**, **the Levites** already belonged to **ADONAI**. Therefore, any additional firstborn sons would need to be **redeemed** by the more conventional ritual of exchanging five silver shekels.⁴⁶