

-Save This Page as a PDF-

The Clan of Kohath

4: 1-20

The clan of Kohath DIG: Why was the clan of Kohath given the awesome responsibility of transporting the holy things of the Tabernacle when he was not the firstborn son? Why was the ark of the covenant covered first? Who could draw near to the holy things on behalf of the people? How would this help Isra'el to understand the nature of ADONAI?

REFLECT: What does this passage teach you about treating the things of God with respect? How do we show respect to God, His servants, and His purposes? What does this passage teach us about how ADONAI has given us each different responsibilities and called us to work together for His glory? What part does He want you to play this week?

The Kohathites were responsible for transporting the most holy things in the Tabernacle.

The Kohathites are listed first, even though **Kohath** was not **the first born** (see **3:14-39**). The reason for this elevation of the second **son** over **his older** brother seems to be based on the sovereign selection of **the LORD** and the favored work **He** gave this family in proximity to **the sacred things**. Furthermore, this reflects a recurring pattern: the surprising elevation of a lesser **son** over **his** older brother. These are examples of the grace of **God** that reaches out in sovereign selection, bringing blessing to whom **He** wishes to bring blessing, elevating whom **He** desires to elevate, for reasons of **His** own will. The pattern is found repeatedly in the TaNaKh: **Isaac** over **Ishmael**, **Jacob** over **Esau**, **Joseph** over **Reuben**, **Moses** over **Aaron**, and **Sha'ul** and **David** over their respective brothers.⁵⁸

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **Your** great wisdom and love. How amazing that **You** see both into the future and into people's hearts! It is such a comfort that **Your** criteria for choosing someone is the purity of their hearts - not how good looking they are or their being first in birth order. Though **David** was the eighth son of **his father (First Samuel 16:10)**, he was the son with the pure heart and so **he** was chosen. **But ADONAI said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or his stature, because I have already refused him. For He***

does not see a man as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but ADONAI looks into the heart” (First Samuel 16:7).

*Praise **You** that to enter **Your** holy place, **You** do not require a huge gift of money, nor a fantastic deed; but **You** instead look for purity of heart. **Who may go up on the mountain of ADONAI? Who may stand in His holy place? One with clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted his soul in vain, nor sworn deceitfully. He will receive a blessing from Adonai, righteousness from God his salvation (Psalms 24:3-5).** Thank **You** that since no one can live perfectly, **You** sent **Messiah Yeshua** to cancel sin’s claim on sinners, so all who believe in **You** as their **Lord** and **Savior** have their sins forgiven and are given a pure heart thru **Messiah’s** righteousness. **He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21).** We desire to guard our hearts that we may please and love **You** in all we say, and do and think. In **Messiah Yeshua’s** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*

The length of service in the Tabernacle (4:1-49): The sense of order and organization already observed in **Numbers** comes to its finest point in this chapter. Again we observe that the standard pattern in Hebrew prose is a movement from the general to the specific. **Chapters 1-4** follow this concept nicely. **Chapter 1** presents **the leaders** and the numbers of **the soldiers** conscripted from each **tribe**; **Chapter 2** shows how each of the tribes is related to groupings surrounding **the Tabernacle**; **Chapter 3** gives **the census of the Levitical males from one month and older** and a listing of **the Levites by their clans**; however, **Chapter 4** presents the census of **the Levites from thirty to fifty years old**, and the duties of each **clan**. **The chapters** have moved from the nation as a whole to the particular families of the one tribe that has the responsibility to maintain the symbols of **Isra’el’s** worship of **ADONAI**. Each chapter gets more specific, narrowing in focus, with the central emphasis on the worship of **the LORD** at **the Tabernacle**.⁵⁹

The Kohathites were responsible for the most holy things in the Tabernacle (4:1-3): The census proceeds through the three households of **Levites**, headed by the three **sons of Levi**. **The Kohathites** were the first, for **they** were assigned to **care for the most holy things in the Tabernacle (1:4)**. **ADONAI** said to **Moshe** and **Aaron**, “**Take a census of the descendants of Kohath, who are among the descendants of Levi, by clans and families.**” All **the descendants of Aaron** began **their** tour of duty in **the priesthood and their work in the Tabernacle** at the same age, **from thirty to fifty years old**. It is significant that **John the Baptist**, who was **himself** both a **Levite** and a **priest**, seems to have begun **his** ministry at **the age of thirty**. **The Master** did the same. And **thirty** is

probably a good target age for men to enter the office of overseer in the synagogues. **The Levites** were to give twenty years of service to **their** ministry in **the Tabernacle/Temple**. In the days of **the Temple**, the tribe was divided into different courses (see the commentary on [the Life of David, to see link click Er - The Levites](#)), like **the priesthood**, and **the Levites** took rotations. When off-duty, **a Levite** was to be given to Torah study and teaching the community.⁶⁰ **The Sanctuary** objects that **the Kohathites** transported **were to be carried on their shoulders** with **poles** made for that purpose (**Numbers 7:9; Exodus 25:26-28**).



The Ark of the Covenant (4:4-6): Here is how the descendants of Kohath are to serve in the Tabernacle and care for the most sacred things: when the time comes to break camp, Aaron is to go in with his sons, take down the inner veil of the Tabernacle (see the commentary on [Exodus Fq - The Inner Veil of the Sanctuary: That is Christ, His Body](#)), and cover the Ark of the covenant with it. On that they are to place **a yellow-orange covering of fine leather (Exodus 26:14)**, and on top of that spread an all-blue cloth. Then they are to insert the carrying-poles (see the commentary on [the Life of David Et - The Kohathites](#)). This would guard **the holy ark** from the gaze of human eyes (**4:20**) and protect it from the elements.

It should be noted that **the clothes** of **the other holy things** are not qualified by the Hebrew adjective *kalil*, or *pure*. Another distinction for **the Ark** was that **the blue cloth** was on top of the other coverings (see above), to distinguish **it** from the other **sacred things**, which were covered by **a yellow-orange covering of fine leather**. Since the function of the latter was to protect **the holy things** against dust and rain, perhaps **the Ark's blue cover** was allowed to be on top only when weather permitted.

The colors of the coverings were also instrumental in the order in which they were readied for transport. **The Ark of the covenant**, the most sacred of **the holy things**, was **covered**

first by **the inner veil**, which **itself** was composed of three colors (**Exodus 26:31**), followed by a **yellow-orange covering of fine leather**, and, last, an **all-blue cloth**. **The Table of Showbread**, next in sequence and, hence, in **holiness**, was covered first by a **blue cloth**, followed by a **scarlet cloth**, and then a **yellow-orange covering of fine leather**. **The Lampstand** and **the Golden Altar of Incense** were covered by a **blue cloth** and a **yellow-orange covering of fine leather**. **The Bronze Altar** and probably **the Bronze Basin**, the least **sacred of the holy things** since they stood outside in the Courtyard and not in **the Sanctuary**. They were provided with a **purple cloth** and a **yellow-orange covering of fine leather**.

Thus, the sacred colors of **the holy things** as well as their sequence indicate **their holiness** rank. **The Ark of the covenant**, covered by all three sacred colors, was **the holiest**. **The Table of Showbread**, next in holiness, claimed two of the sacred colors. **The Golden Altar of Incense** and **the Lampstand** were provided one sacred color, **blue**, denoting that **they** were equal in **holiness**. **The Bronze Altar**, and probably **the Bronze Basin**, were also granted one sacred color, but it was **purple**, not **blue**. In this manner the sequence of **the holy things** was marked by the differentiation in the colors of **their** coverings, both signifying a descending order of holiness. These distinctions were matched by the quality and workmanship of **the sacred things** themselves: **The holy things in the Sanctuary** were made of **gold**, while **the courtyard** were made of **bronze**. The order of dismantling **the sacred things** was the same as for reassembling **them** (**Exodus 40:17-33**).⁶¹

The Table of Showbread (4:7-8): On the table of showbread (see Exodus [Fo](#) - The Bread of the Presence in the Sanctuary: Christ, the Bread of Life) they are to spread a blue cloth and place on it the dishes, incense pans, offering bowls and pitchers. The perpetual bread is to remain on the table. They are to spread on these things a scarlet cloth, cover them with a **yellow-orange covering of fine leather** and insert the poles.

The Menorah (4:9-10): They are to take a blue cloth and cover the menorah for the light (see Exodus [Fn](#) - The Menorah in the Sanctuary: Christ, the Light of the World), its lamps, its tongs, its trays and the jars used to add oil to it. They are to wrap it and all its accessories in fine leather and place them on a carrying-frame.

The Altar of Incense and utensils used in the Sanctuary (11-12): On the gold altar (see Exodus [Fp](#) - Altar of Incense in the Sanctuary: Christ, Our Advocate with the Father) they are to spread a blue cloth, cover it with a **yellow-orange covering of**

fine leather and insert its carrying-poles. They are to take all the utensils they use when serving in the sanctuary and put them in a blue cloth, cover them with fine leather and place them on a carrying-frame.

The Bronze Altar and Bronze Basin (4:13-15): After removing the greasy ashes from the bronze altar (see Exodus [Fa](#) - Build Altar of Acacia Wood Overlaid with Bronze), and probably the bronze basin (see Exodus [Fh](#) - The Bronze Basin: Christ, Our Cleanser), they are to spread a purple cloth over it (slightly red, hinting the blood of the sacrifices) and place on it all the utensils required for their altar service - the fire pans, meat-hooks, shovels, basins and other utensils for the altar. Then they are to spread over it a yellow-orange covering of fine leather and insert its carrying-poles. Only when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the sacred utensils, when the camp is about to move forward, then the descendants of Kohath are to come and carry them. But they are not to touch the sacred things, so that they won't die. The sad story of Uzzah, who attempted to keep the Ark of the covenant from tumbling to the earth when David was having it brought to Jerusalem (see [the Life of David Cr](#) - The Ark Brought to Yerushalayim), was an unwitting test of the profound significance of these words.⁶² They were only to touch the poles carrying the holy things. Again, the holiness of God's Sanctuary (which is the holiness of God Himself) was not to be treated lightly. These things are the responsibility of the descendants of Kohath in the Tabernacle.

Eleazar (4:16): Eleazar, Aaron's older surviving son (see the commentary on [Leviticus Bi](#) - The Mercy Shown to Eleazar and Ithamar), was given the responsibility of four holy things not previously mentioned as well as the administrative oversight of the Tabernacle and its furnishings as set out in the previous verses. He was responsible for the oil for the light (Exodus 27:20-21), the fragrant incense (Exodus 30:34-38), the continuing grain offering (see [Leviticus Ap](#) - The Minhah Offering: Assuring People of God's Acceptance), and the anointing oil (Exodus 30:22-33). He is to be in charge of the entire Tabernacle and everything in it, including the Sanctuary and its furnishings. In God's mercy, He provided a person who could draw near to the holy things on behalf of the people. It is possible that Eleazar himself carried the four sacred things since all of them were holy and thus had to be handled by a priest.⁶³

The Kohath clan (4:17-20): Since the danger to the Kohathites from accidental exposure to the holy things was great, these verses underline that danger and warn Moses, and especially Aaron, to take care in the packing and preparation of the sacred things for transport. These items needed to be treated properly: any improper approach

toward, touch of, or glance at **the sacred things** would mean **death**. **ADONAI** said to **Moshe and Aaron**, “**Do not cut off the clan of Kohath from among the Levites; rather, do this for them, so that they will live and not die: when they approach the especially holy things, Aaron and his sons are to go in - and you are to assign each one his task; but the descendants of Kohath are not to go in and look at the sacred things as they are being covered; if they do, they will die.**” Even though the primary care of **the sacred things** was given to **the Kohathites**, **they** were forbidden to **touch them (4:15)**, or even **look at them (4:20)**, lest **they die**. These limits are stunning. Even as **the holy angels** who surround **the throne** of **the Divine Presence** **shield their faces and feet** from **the Presence** (see the commentary on [Isaiah Bo - In the Year King Uzziah Died](#)), so **the Kohathites** would shield **themselves** from too familiar an approach to **the sacred things**, for **they** symbolized **the presence** of **the most holy God**. All the work of **the Kohathites** was to be strictly supervised by **Aaron** and **his sons**; only **the priests themselves** were able to **touch** or **look** upon **the unveiled holy things**.

As in other instances of this sort, the underlying reason on **God’s** part may well have been **mercy**. It is through **His mercy** that **YHVH** made **Himself** known to anyone; through **His** continuing **mercy** **He** did not take the lives of mere persons because of their wickedness; and through **His mercy** **He** **tabernacled** in our midst ([John 1:1-14](#)). The revelation of **the Word of God** brought with it demands, some of which seem harsh and difficult. But **ADONAI** was, and is, near. Some of **His** demands seem so judgmental, yet **Ha’Shem** has not destroyed everyone. Some seem to be threatening, yet **the LORD**, by **His mercy**, allowed some sense of **His presence** to remain known in **the camp of Isra’el**. **His** manifestation was based on **His mercy**, and **His** limitations allowed **His mercy** to continue to be realized.⁶⁴

Haftarah B’midbar: Hosea 2:20

(see the commentary on [Deuteronomy Af - Parashah](#))

Hosea prophesies a great day in the end ([Hosea 1:10-11](#)) though **Isra’el** will first bring disgrace by acting like **a prostitute (Hosea 2:2-7)**. **She** suffers terrible consequences for **her** faithlessness ([Hosea 2:8-13](#)). But restoration follows ([Hosea 2:14-20](#)). **Isra’el** sings again as in **her** youth, when **God** brought **her** out from Egypt **to the desert to speak to her heart (Hosea 2:14-16)**. Remember that **Hosea** shares in **Isra’el’s** history by marrying **Gomer, a prostitute** who gives birth to three children **Yizra’el (God will sow)** fathered by **Hosea**; and **Lo’Ruchamah (No mercy)** and **Lo’Ammi (Not My People)**, both fathered by other paying customers of the prostitute. But **Hosea** cannot reject **his** children! In that moment, **YHVH** shows **Hosea** that **He** cannot reject **Isra’el** either! Thus, **ADONAI** renews

His covenant in **faithfulness** and promises to change **Isra'el's** very nature (**Hosea 2:17**). **She** shall be made **faithful** and **she will know ADONAI** (**Hosea 2:20**).⁶⁵

B'rit Chadashah: Romans 9:33

Paul quotes **Hosea** to say that **Lo'Ammi** (*Not My People*) becomes **God's people** (**Romans 9:25-26**). The terrible consequences of faithlessness result in **Isra'el** being carved down from being countless as the grains of sand (**Hosea 2:1**) to little more than a remnant (**Romans 9:27-29**). Nevertheless, **ADONAI** promises to restore **her faithfulness** and make **it** a constitutional reality that's given to **the Gentiles** as well (**Romans 9:30**). In this portion, **the Levites** replaced the firstborns in the inner circle surrounding **the Tabernacle**, as a direct result of **their** faithfulness to **God** when the rest of **Isra'el** rebelled **Him** (see the commentary on **Exodus Gv - And All the Levites Rallied to Moses**). Now **YHVH** brings others near (**Lo'Ruchamah** and **Lo'Ammi**) - not simply as a result of **Isra'el's** faithlessness, but also **to make known the riches of God's glory to those who are objects of his mercy . . . that is, whom He called not only from among the Jews, but also from among the Gentiles** (see the commentary on **Romans Cr - The Objections to Isra'el's Past Paradox**)!⁶⁶