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Introduction

Moses is commanded to take the sum of the sons of Kohath from thirty years old and upward, Numbers 4:1-4. The service which they had to perform, Numbers 4:5-15. The office of Eleazar, Numbers 4:16. The family of Kohath to be continued among the Levites, Numbers 4:17-19. They are not to go into the holy of holies, Numbers 4:20. The sum of the sons of Gershon, Numbers 4:21-23. The service they had to perform, Numbers 4:24-27. They are to be under Ithamar, Numbers 4:28. The sum of the sons of Merari, Numbers 4:29, Numbers 4:30. The service they had to perform, Numbers 4:31-33. The sum of all the families of Kohath, 2,750, Numbers 4:34-37. The sum of the families of Gershon, 2,630, Numbers 4:38-41. The sum of the families of Merari, 3,200, Numbers 4:42-45. The sum total of the families of Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, 8,580, Numbers 4:46-49.

Verse 3

From thirty years old - In Numbers 8:24, the Levites are ordered to enter on the service of the tabernacle at the age of twenty-five years; and in 1 Chronicles 23:24, they were ordered to commence that work at twenty years of age. How can these different times be reconciled?

1. At the time of which Moses speaks here, the Levitical service was exceedingly severe, and consequently required men full grown, strong, and stout, to perform it; the age therefore of thirty years was appointed as the period for commencing this service, the weightier part of which is probably here intended.

2. In Numbers 8:24, Moses seems to speak of the service in a general way; the severe, which was to be performed by the full-grown Levites, and the less laborious work which younger men might assist in: hence the age of twenty-five is fixed.

3. In David's time and afterwards, in the fixed tabernacle and temple, the laboriousness of the service no longer existed, and hence twenty years was the age fixed on for all Levites to enter into the work of the sanctuary. The rabbins say that the Levites began to learn to do the service at twenty-five, and that having been instructed five years, they began the public service at thirty, and thus they reconcile the two periods referred to above. We may well suppose that the sons of the prophets continued a considerable time under instructions before they were called fully to exercise themselves in the prophetic office.

Until fifty years old - This was allowing twenty years for public severe service; a very considerate and merciful ordinance. A preacher who devotes his whole time and strength to the service of the Church of God from twenty to fifty or sixty years of age, should be then excused from his severer labor, and maintained at the charge of the sanctuary. This would not only be a great comfort to a worn-out servant of God, but also of great use to the work of the ministry, which, to be faithfully and effectually performed, requires all the powers of the body and mind of man. Old faithful ministers are to be highly respected for their work's sake, and to be supplied with all the necessaries and comforts of life; but how little can they do in the public ministry of the word, however willing to work, when their eye waxes dim and their bodily strength fails! See Numbers 8:25. Both for their own sakes, and for the good of the Church, they should be excused from a labor to which they must be almost every way inadequate. But notwithstanding this comparative inactivity, their counsels, advice, and experience will always be considered as a treasure to the Church of Christ

Verse 20

When the holy things are covered - Literally, כִּבְּלוּ (keballa), when they are swallowed down; which shows the promptitude with which every thing belonging to the holy of holies was put out of sight, for these mysteries must ever be treated with the deepest reverence; and indeed without this they could not have been to them the representatives of heavenly realities. See the concluding note Numbers 4:36 (note).

Verse 36

Those that were numbered - In Numbers 3:27, etc., we have an account of the whole number of the Levites, and here of those only who were able to serve the Lord in the sanctuary. By comparing the two places we find the numbers to stand thus: -

d Levite
FamilyAble
MenUnable
MenTotal
d

d Kohathites 2,750; 5,850; 8,600

d

d Gershonites 2,630; 4,870; 7,500

d

d Merarites 3,200; 3,000; 6,200

d

d

Thus we find that the whole number of the Levites amounted to 22,300, of whom 3,580 were fit for service, and 13,720 unfit, being either too old or too young. What an astonishing number of men, all properly ecclesiastics; all performing some service by which God was glorified, and the congregation at large benefited! See Ainsworth.

From this and the preceding chapter we see the very severe labor which the Levites were obliged to perform while the journeyings of the Israelites lasted. When we consider that there was not less than 10 tons 13 cwt. 24 lb. 14 oz., i. e., almost ten tons and fourteen hundred poundsâ€™ weight of metal employed in the tabernacle, (see the notes on Exodus 38 (note)), besides the immense weight of the skins, hangings, cords, boards, and posts, we shall find it was no very easy matter to transport this movable temple from place to place.

The Gershonites, who were 7,500 men in the service, had to carry the tent, coverings, veils, hangings of the court, etc., etc., Numbers 3:25, Numbers 3:26.

The Kohathites, who were 8,600 men, had to carry the ark, table, candlestick, altars, and instruments of the sanctuary, Numbers 3:31.

The Merarites, who were 6,200 men, had to carry the boards, bars, pillars, sockets, and all matters connected with these belonging to the tabernacle, with the pillars of the court, their sockets, pins, and cords, Numbers 3:36, Numbers 3:37.

The tabernacle was an epitome of the temple: the temple and tabernacle were representatives of the Church of the living God, and of the humanity of our blessed Lord. As God dwelt in the tabernacle and temple, so his fullness dwelt in the man Christ Jesus. These again were types of the Christian Church, which is termed the body of Christ, Ephesians 1:23, where he dwells in the plenitude of the graces of his Spirit.

Mr. Ainsworth has a very useful note on the Numbers 4:20 verse of this chapter, the most edifying part of which I shall here lay before the reader. He considers the tabernacle and temple, not only as pointing out the old dispensation, the annulling of which was typified by their destruction, but he considers also the former as emblematical of the body of man.

â€œThe apostle,â€• says he, â€œtreating of the death of the saints, uses this similitude: â€œIf our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For we that are in This Tabernacle do groan, being burdened, not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life;â€• 2 Corinthians 5:1-4. So Peter calls his death the putting off of his Tabernacle, 2 Peter 1:14. And this similitude is very fit; for, as here, in the tabernacle of Moses,

1. The holy things were first covered and taken away, (see Numbers 4:20), so the soul and its powers are first withdrawn from the body by death.

2. As the curtains and coverings were taken off and folded up, so the skin and flesh of our bodies are pulled off and consumed.

3. As the boards of the tabernacle were disjointed and pulled asunder, so shall our bones and sinews: compare Jobâ€™s description of the formation of man, Numbers 10:8-12; and Solomonâ€™s account of his dissolution, Ecclesiastes 12:3, Ecclesiastes 12:4.

4. As the disjointed and dissolved tabernacle was afterwards set up again, Numbers 10:21, so shall our bodies in the day of the resurrection; see 1 Corinthians 15:51-54.