

# Numbers 3:40-51

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/num/num-3/numbers-340-51/>

*Verses 40 – 51 relate what was to take place for the Levites to replace the firstborn as the LORD’s possession. First, a census was taken of the number of firstborn males of the non-Levite tribes (verses 40 – 43). Then, the LORD declared the Levites as His. Because the number of non-Levite males was greater than the number of Levite males, a “ransom” was to be paid to the priests (verses 44 – 51).*

The next thing *the Lord* commanded of Moses was to *number every firstborn male of the sons of Israel from a month old and upward, and make a list of their names*. The Hebrew word for “number” (“paqad”) can be translated “visit,” “look at,” or “inspect.” Moses was to inspect all of the non-Levite tribes for males one month and older in order to obtain their count. The reason for this was that the LORD told Moses to *take the Levites for Me, I am the Lord*. Taking the Levites for the LORD meant that they belonged to Him and were dedicated to lifetime service to Him.

The plan was for the Lord to have *the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the sons of Israel*. He was also to have *the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the sons of Israel*. The LORD wanted the Levites to be His possession as a redemption of all the firstborn of Israel.

The reason for this change was not given, but it could be that the LORD chose the Levites because they remained faithful to him during the episode with the golden calf (Exodus 32 – 34, especially Exodus 32:26 – 28). It is also likely a matter of practicality, as has been the case with God’s entire organization of Israel as a nation. This made a clear distinction between the policing function of the Levites, who were holy to the LORD, from the military function of the other tribes, which would likely minimize the potential for civil war. Any justice meted by the Levites would be considered as coming from the authority of God, avoiding a blood feud. This was the case in two episodes where Levites slew fellow Israelites; neither of these events started a civil war (Exodus 32:25-39; Numbers 25:7).

In obedience, *Moses numbered all the firstborn among the sons of Israel, just as the Lord had commanded him*. The result of Moses’ count of *all the firstborn males by the number of names from a month old and upward* was 22,273 (v. 43).

Many have questioned this number as being low. The number of Israelite males 20 years and older was numbered as 603,550 in Numbers 1:46. This would mean that there was one firstborn son counted for about every 27 males. Though many proposals have been given, one plausible explanation could be that the number “22,273” referred to those firstborn males born after the tribe of Levi was designated as set apart to the LORD, or perhaps after the redemption requirement was given after the first Passover in Egypt.

After the count of males was determined, again *the Lord spoke to Moses* (v. 44). He commanded Moses to *take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the sons of Israel and the cattle of the Levites*. The firstborn had been set aside to be sanctified unto the LORD after the LORD had delivered all the firstborn of Israel from the tenth plague, having the death angel “pass over” each doorpost sprinkled in blood (Exodus 13:1-2). Now God is redeeming each firstborn male by setting aside the Levites for His dedicated service. God’s statement that *the Levites shall be Mine* corresponds to God’s command in Exodus 13:1, “Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel.” God will now substitute the Levites in place of the firstborn of Israel to serve Him. This is consistent with the biblical pattern of redemption. He can declare this because He is *the Lord*. He is the great Suzerain/ruler over Israel, who has entered into a covenant with His people. This is a redemptive provision that also brings order to the nation. So, now the male Levites were the LORD’s special possession, rather than the firstborn males of the other tribes.

The LORD then instructed Moses concerning *the ransom of the 273 of the firstborn of the sons of Israel who are in excess beyond the Levites*. The Levites numbered 22,000 (v. 39), leaving the excess of 273. The 22,000 were to be redeemed man for man with 22,000 male Levites. That left 273 firstborn unredeemed. God will now make provision for them in order to redeem these men from service in the sanctuary. This provision would maintain family unity while fully satisfying the legal requirement for the firstborn to be sanctified unto the LORD.

In order to sanctify the 273 firstborn who did not have a Levite male to substitute for them, the LORD required a *ransom*. The assigned ransom was for the people to pay *five shekels apiece, per head*. This had to be done *in terms of the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs)*. This standard for the “shekel of the sanctuary” was first established in Exodus 30:13 as equaling *twenty gerahs*. A *gerah* was a unit of weight, equivalent to around 0.4 ounces (or 11.4 grams). This would make the sanctuary shekel’s weight around 8 ounces (over 226 grams) of silver. So, the “gerah” to be used for the ransom was based on the standard for a shekel used in the sanctuary. These shekels weighed more than the others. The average price for an ounce of silver in 2020 was a little less than US \$21. So this ransom payment would be about US \$165 in 2020 dollars. The global median annual income in 2020 was roughly US \$1500, so this would be about a month of wages for the median income earner in 2020.

Once the ransom had been paid, Moses was to *give the money, the ransom of those who are in excess among them, to Aaron and to his sons*. The ransom thus went to the priests and supported the work and ministry of the sanctuary. This would be true whether the priests used the funds for their own support, or for temple service; a significant part of the tithe Israel was to pay was to support the sustenance of the Levites.

In response to the LORD’s command, *Moses took the ransom money from those who were in excess, beyond those ransomed by the Levites*. The ransom was collected *from the firstborn of the sons of Israel he took the money in terms of the shekel of the sanctuary*. The total of the ransom was 1,365 shekels. According to tradition, a lot was drawn to determine which families had to pay, and which were considered redeemed by the Levites.

Now that the ransom had been collected, *Moses gave the ransom money to Aaron and to his sons*, and he did this *at the command of the Lord, just as the Lord had commanded Moses*. Moses once again obeyed the word of the LORD explicitly. In this instance the people also obeyed the LORD's command.

The concept of the ransom can be seen clearly in the New Testament. Jesus Christ offered Himself a "ransom for many" (Matthew 20:29; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6).

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>40</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Number every firstborn male of the sons of Israel from a month old and upward, and make a list of their names. <sup>41</sup> You shall take the Levites for Me, I am the Lord, instead of all the firstborn among the sons of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the sons of Israel." <sup>42</sup> So Moses numbered all the firstborn among the sons of Israel, just as the Lord had commanded him; <sup>43</sup> and all the firstborn males by the number of names from a month old and upward, for their numbered men were 22,273.

<sup>44</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>45</sup> "Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the sons of Israel and the cattle of the Levites. And the Levites shall be Mine; I am the Lord. <sup>46</sup> For the ransom of the 273 of the firstborn of the sons of Israel who are in excess beyond the Levites, <sup>47</sup> you shall take five shekels apiece, per head; you shall take *them* in terms of the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), <sup>48</sup> and give the money, the ransom of those who are in excess among them, to Aaron and to his sons." <sup>49</sup> So Moses took the ransom money from those who were in excess, beyond those ransomed by the Levites; <sup>50</sup> from the firstborn of the sons of Israel he took the money in terms of the shekel of the sanctuary, 1,365. <sup>51</sup> Then Moses gave the ransom money to Aaron and to his sons, at the command of the Lord, just as the Lord had commanded Moses.