

# Numbers 4:1-15

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/num/num-4/numbers-41-15/>

*The LORD commanded Moses to take another census of the family of Kohath, of the tribe of Levi, in verses 1-20. This census counted how many males there were between 30 and 50 years old. The family of Kohath was given the privilege of caring for the holiest items in the tabernacle. Before these items could be handled by the Kohathites, the priests had to cover them, because for any non-priest to look upon these items resulted in certain death.*

After the instructions found in chapter 3, *the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron* (v. 1). It is interesting that in chapter 3, the commands were given to Moses (Numbers 3:5, 11, 14, 44). Here, the command was given to both Moses and Aaron. Perhaps this was because the instructions here dealt with the tabernacle and the items inside it, and Aaron was the high priest. The Lord told them to *take a census of the descendants of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, by their families, by their fathers' households* (v. 2). Kohath was the second son of Levi.

This census was distinct from the one in chapter 3, where males one month and older were counted. That census was probably done to get the number of the firstborn of Israel, that needed to be ransomed. Here, they were to count how many males that were *thirty years and upward, even to fifty years old* (v. 3). This group would *enter the service to do the work in the tent of meeting*. The men in this age group were the ones in active service to the priests of the LORD. It is interesting to note that military service was allowed beginning at age twenty. But the sons of Kohath were not to enter in to the service of the tabernacle until age thirty.

Specifically, *the work of the descendants of Kohath in the tent of meeting was concerning the most holy things* (v. 4). It was appropriate that the family of Kohath be assigned the “most holy things” since Aaron (the priestly line) and Moses belonged to this family.

The instructions in verses 5-15 were in regard to *when the camp sets out* (v. 5), meaning when the nation decided to move locations. Before the Kohathites could do their work, the priests had work to do. Specifically, *Aaron and his sons* had to do quite a few things to prepare for the transport of the tabernacle and its contents.

First, the priests were commanded *to go in and they shall take down the veil of the screen*. This was the “veil” that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place inside the tabernacle (see Exodus 26:31, 36:35). They were to *cover the ark of the testimony with it* (see Exodus 25:10, 37:1). To cover the veil, they were to *lay a covering of porpoise skin on it* (v. 6), and on top of that they needed to *spread over it a cloth of pure blue*.

It is significant that the blue cloth covered the porpoise skin, especially in light of the fact that the porpoise skin usually was on top of the other coverings for the holy items mentioned in verses 7-10. They probably did this so that the ark could be easily identified while moving through the wilderness.

The meaning of the Hebrew word for “porpoise” (Heb. “tahash”) has long been debated. The NIV translates the word as “sea cow,” while the NKJV renders it “badger skin.” Other translations use the ambiguous term “leather” to translate it. Because it is related to the Arabic word for “dolphin,” many think that “porpoise” is probably the correct meaning.

Finally, they were to *insert its poles* for easy transport of the table through the wilderness to their next location to set up camp.

The next item considered was *the table of the bread of the Presence* (v. 7). The “bread of the Presence” (Heb. “shūlhān hapānīm,” lit. “table of faces”) is often translated “table of shewbread.” It was described in Exodus 25:23 and constructed in Exodus 37:10.

In preparation for travel, Aaron and his sons were to *spread a cloth of blue and put on it the dishes and the pans and the sacrificial bowls and the jars for the drink offering, and the continual bread shall be on it*. The *cloth of blue* was draped over the table first.

*Blue* (Heb. “tekēlet,” possibly bluish-violet) was the color signifying that which is heavenly. Also, because it was the color of the garments of the high priest (Exodus 28:31) and people of royalty (1 Samuel 18:4), it represented royalty as well.

The *dishes* (Heb. “haqqə‘ārōt”) were used with the *continual bread* that was on the table. The *pans* (translated “pitchers” in other English translations), the *sacrificial bowls* (Heb. “menaqqîyâ”), and the *jars* (Heb. “qə·šō·wt,” “mugs”) were used by the priests *for the drink offering*.

The *drink offering* (along with the grain offering) was to be presented when a person brought their burnt offering (a lamb) to the altar (Exodus 29:40; Numbers 28:7-38). It was usually wine, though “string drink” (Numbers 28:7). It symbolized giving back to the LORD what He had given (both grain and *drink*) to sustain the life of the offeror. Paul used this to describe his experiences in prison (Philippians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:6).

Over the blue cloth and the items on the table, they were to *spread over them a cloth of scarlet material* (v. 8), then over the scarlet cloth they needed to *cover the same with a covering of porpoise skin*. *Scarlet* represents blood and sacrifice. For the *scarlet* linen to cover the *blue* linen (representing the heavenly) on the table of the Presence could represent the separation of man from God, and the only way to bridge the gap was through sacrifice. This can be seen when the “veil of the temple was torn in two” (Luke 23:45). The “veil” separating the Holy of Holies from casual human contact was made of *blue*, purple, and *scarlet* threads. It was “torn” when Jesus died, providing humans with direct access to our God (Hebrews 4:16).

Finally, they were to cover the Table of Shewbread and its utensils, with *a covering of porpoise skin*, both to protect it against the elements and to indicate that it was not the ark.

Once the table and the associated articles had been covered, they were to *insert its poles* so they could carry it when journeying.

The priests then were to *take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand for the light* (v. 9). This was described in Exodus 25:31ff and Exodus 37:17ff. They needed to use a blue cloth to cover *its lamps and its snuffers, and its trays and all its oil vessels, by which they serve it*. After placing the blue cloth over the lampstand and its related items, they were instructed then to *put it and all its utensils in a covering of porpoise skin, and shall put it on the carrying bars* (v. 10). The “carrying bars” were probably frames upon which they placed these items in order to transport them from one location to the next.

The same was to be done to *the golden altar* (v.11), described in Exodus 27:1ff and in Exodus 38:1ff. To prepare it for transport, the priests were to *spread a blue cloth and cover it with a covering of porpoise skin*, similar to the objects described above. Lastly, they were to *insert its poles* for transport. All this was to be done by the priests, not the sons of Kohath.

Thus, they were to *take all the utensils of service, with which they serve in the sanctuary* (v. 12). The “utensils” were specified and built in Exodus 27:3 and Exodus 38:3. They were to *put them in a blue cloth and cover them with a covering of porpoise skin, and put them on the carrying bars* (v. 12). The “carrying bars” were probably frames upon which they placed these items for transport. The priests were also responsible to *take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it* (v. 13). They needed to clean the altar by removing the ashes of the burnt offerings before it was to be carried. They then covered the altar with a *purple* (not blue) cloth.

The color “purple” symbolized royalty, or royal glory. It can also signify the union of that which was heavenly (the color blue) and that which was earthly (the color scarlet). This can be seen in the nature of Jesus Christ—“blue” representing His being the divine Son of God, “scarlet” representing His human sacrificial glory, and “purple” representing the combination of His deity and His humanity in one Person.

Along with the altar, the priests needed to *put on it all its utensils by which they serve in connection with it* (v. 14), meaning *the firepans, the forks and shovels and the basins, all the utensils of the altar*. These utensils, described in Exodus 27:3 and made of bronze in Exodus 38:3, were to be used in cleaning the ashes of burnt offerings from the altar.

Once this was done, they were instructed to *spread a cover of porpoise skin over it and insert its poles* with which the items were to be carried.

Verse 15 contains a summary of what was to occur when the Israelites broke camp in order to relocate. The LORD stated that *when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy objects and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is to set out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry them* (v. 15). Aaron was from the line of Kohath, and only his sons were priests. The Kohathites that were not priests could not touch or even look at an item that was not covered—they could only carry the tabernacle items after they had been covered by the priests.

The tabernacle objects had to be covered *so that they will not touch the holy objects and die*. This stresses again that protecting the holiness of the LORD was to be a priority at all times. Violating that holiness resulted in physical death.

Moses then summarized the section by saying that *these are the things in the tent of meeting which the sons of Kohath are to carry*. They had been given the privilege of carrying the holy items that were inside the tabernacle as their assigned responsibility.

**Biblical Text:**

<sup>1</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Take a census of the descendants of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, by their families, by their fathers’ households, <sup>3</sup> from thirty years and upward, even to fifty years old, all who enter the service to do the work in the tent of meeting. <sup>4</sup> This is the work of the descendants of Kohath in the tent of meeting, *concerning* the most holy things.

<sup>5</sup> “When the camp sets out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and they shall take down the veil of the screen and cover the ark of the testimony with it; <sup>6</sup> and they shall lay a covering of porpoise skin on it, and shall spread over *it* a cloth of pure blue, and shall insert its poles. <sup>7</sup> Over the table of the bread of the Presence they shall also spread a cloth of blue and put on it the dishes and the pans and the sacrificial bowls and the jars for the drink offering, and the continual bread shall be on it. <sup>8</sup> They shall spread over them a cloth of scarlet *material*, and cover the same with a covering of porpoise skin, and they shall insert its poles. <sup>9</sup> Then they shall take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand for the light, along with its lamps and its snuffers, and its trays and all its oil vessels, by which they serve it; <sup>10</sup> and they shall put it and all its utensils in a covering of porpoise skin, and shall put it on the carrying bars. <sup>11</sup> Over the golden altar they shall spread a blue cloth and cover it with a covering of porpoise skin, and shall insert its poles; <sup>12</sup> and they shall take all the utensils of service, with which they serve in the sanctuary, and put them in a blue cloth and cover them with a covering of porpoise skin, and put them on the carrying bars. <sup>13</sup> Then they shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it. <sup>14</sup> They shall also put on it all its utensils by which they serve in connection with it: the firepans, the forks and shovels and the basins, all the utensils of the altar; and they shall spread a cover of porpoise skin over it and insert its poles. <sup>15</sup> When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy *objects* and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is to set out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry *them*, so that they will not touch the holy *objects* and die. These are the things in the tent of meeting which the sons of Kohath are to carry.