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NUMBERS 4: 15-20

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This passage in the Book of the Law has suffered considerably at the hands of transcribers, and now presents several impossible readings. Careful examination of the difficulties, however, leads to their solution.

The proper stand-point from which the whole passage is to be viewed is the distinction laid down between Aaron and his sons on the one hand, as the most highly privileged servants of the Lord, who were permitted, as priests, to enter into the Sanctuary, there to view and handle the sacred furniture and vessels; and the children of Kohath on the other hand, who, though more honored than the rest of the Israelites, were nevertheless denied that near approach which was reserved for the priests (see verses 5-16). The duties assigned to the latter may accordingly be described as superior or primary, while those of the Kohathites were subordinate or secondary, for these are to be regarded as assistants to the Aaronic family.

The directions given regarding the respective duties of these two classes of ministrants are plain and clear; and to make sure that the Kohathites should not see or handle the sacred utensils, these were covered up by the priests and then placed on cars by means of which they might be carried, so as to prevent the Kohathites from even *feeling* the vessels thus concealed.

A clear perception of these restrictions of service laid down for the Kohathites enables us to read aright the verses now singled out, and gives a clue to the correction of the Massoretic Text. The first correction is to be made at the middle of verse 15, where we read that after Aaron and his sons had finished covering up the Sanctuary and its articles of furniture, the Kohathites were to come and carry their appointed burdens; then follows a perplexing clause, which, simply rendered on the basis of the Received Hebrew, might be translated, 'but they shall not touch the Sanctuary and die,' while the form in our Authorized Version is, 'but they shall not touch [any] holy

thing, lest they die,' and the Revised Version, 'but they shall not touch the Sanctuary [*marg.* 'holy things'] lest they die.'¹ In the light of what has now been stated, however, exception may reasonably be taken to the form of the second verb, viz. וַיָּמָתוּ, which, though strictly meaning 'and they shall die,' has been constrained here to mean 'lest they die'; but as the normal construction in Hebrew for such an expression would rather be פָּנֵי-יָמוֹתָיו (see Gen. 3:3; 11:4; 19:15, 19:26:9; 32:12; 38:11, 23; 45:11; Ex. 5:3; 19:21, 22, etc.), or, less frequently, וְלֹא-יָמוֹתָיו (see Lev. 10:6, 9; Deut. 24:15; 25:3 etc.), the probability is that וַיָּמָתוּ has been substituted for the resemblant verb וַיָּמָשׁוּ (from מָוֶשׁ), or וַיָּמָשׁוּ (from the more commonly occurring verb מָשַׁשׁ) by a transcriber who mistook what was dictated to him by a person who read from an older copy.² If either of these suggested forms be now substituted for what is presented in the Massoretic Text, the meaning of the middle portion of verse 15 becomes, 'afterwards, the sons of Kohath shall enter in, to carry away [the vessels of the Tabernacle], but they shall not touch the Sanctuary, and handle'³ [the furniture].

Verse 22 calls for no remark, except that in the expression 'Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest,' there appears the Note Line before 'the son of Aaron,' probably to indicate that these words need not be deemed a necessary explanation.

The greatest difficulties, however, meet us in the succeeding section. After the brief introductory verse (17), 'And the Lord spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying,' there follows an ordinance which must be regarded, in its Massoretic form, or in any fair translation of the same, as most remarkable: 'Do not cut off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from the midst of the Levites; but this do ye to them, that they may live and not die when they approach the holy of holies: Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint them, each one to his work and to his burden, but they shall not go in to see, when enveloping the

¹ The Septuagint rendering is οὐχ ἀψοῦνται τῶν ἁγίων, ἵνα μὴ ἀποθάνωσι, and that of the Vulgate *et non tangerent vasa sanctuarii, ne moriantur.*

² Even at the present day, many Jews pronounce ט as a slight sibilant: thus בת is not pronounced *bath*, but *bas*.

³ See the use of מָוֶשׁ in Gen. 27:2, and of מָשַׁשׁ in 27:12, 22; 31:34, 37; Deut. 28:29 etc.

Sanctuary, and die.' It will be most convenient to consider, separately, the extraordinary terms or constructions here, and endeavor to substitute, in each case, something more reasonable.

'Do not cut off the . . . Kohathites . . . ' Certainly, אֶל-תִּכְרִיתוֹ signifies 'Do not cut off,' (i. e. exterminate, or annihilate; see Deut. 12: 29; 19: 1; Josh. 11: 21; I Sam. 2: 33; 24: 22; II Sam. 7: 9 etc.); but why should such a prohibition find a place here, when the Kohathites had been assigned a most honorable position in the community, with relative duties to perform, and had done nothing to incur extermination? The fact seems to be, however, that a transcriber misunderstood an assistant who read to him from a previous copy, and wrote the astounding term תִּכְרִיתוֹ instead of its sonal resemblant תִּקְרִיבוֹ; when this form is restored astonishment is dispelled, for the meaning now becomes, 'Do not bring near,' or 'Do not permit to approach.'

Next we are confronted with a complex impression presenting several strange features, viz. אֶת-שֵׁבֶט מִשְׁפַּחַת הַקֹּהֲתִי, 'the tribe of the families of the Kohathites.' First, it is obvious that the Kohathites did not form a 'tribe,' but merely *part* of a tribe, that of Levi (see verse 2); a tribe was the greater whole, composed of a number of families. Second, the closing term in the expression now quoted is in the singular, whereas it should rather be in the plural form, viz. הַקֹּהֲתִים (see Num. 10: 21; 2 Chr. 20: 19; 34: 12, also Num. 3: 27; 10: 21 in some editions), from which the final ם has disappeared here before the same letter at the head of the word immediately following. The whole expression, however, is not reduced to acceptable form until אֶת-שֵׁבֶט is changed to its resemblant אֶל-שָׂרָת, and followed perhaps by אֵת before 'the families of the Kohathites,' which is thus distinctly marked as a direct and definite accusative. Clear light is now thrown on the verse through the restoration of the rare noun שָׂרָת (now found elsewhere only in verse 12, and in II Chr. 24: 14), which distinctively indicates *service of the highest character, involving close personal relation to the superior*,⁴

⁴ Contrast with this term the noun עֲבָדָה, which signifies subordinate or sometimes even menial service, and is thus appropriately employed in the following verse where mention is made of the position and duties assigned to the Kohathites in the Tabernacle.

especially religious service performed by the priests, who are thus designated **מְשָׁרְתֵי הַיהוָה** in Joel 1:9; 2:17 (see also Jer. 33:21, 22; Ezek. 44:11; 45:4, 5 etc.).⁵

At the beginning of verse 19, the Note Line doubtless calls attention to the haplographic omission of **ת** (after the same letter ending the form **וְזָאת**) from the beginning of the imperative **עֲשׂוּ**; restoration of this letter will change the somewhat unusual command, 'But this do ye,' into a milder form (**תַּעֲשׂוּ**), which gives the meaning 'But this shall ye do' (see Num. 8:7, 26; 15:12; 29:39; Deut. 7:5; Jud. 7:17 etc.). In the middle of the verse, **אֶת־** may safely be regarded as a mistranscription of **אֶל־**; the substitution of which will change an abnormal into a normal construction in the expression 'When they draw near to the holy of holies.'

Verse 20, though short, presents in the latter half two difficulties which reveal themselves in the different translations which have been offered. Our Authorized Version runs thus: 'But they [the Kohathites] shall not go in to see where the holy things are covered, lest they die'; while the rendering of the Revisers is, 'But they shall not go in to see the Sanctuary [*marg.* 'holy things'], even for a moment, lest they die.' The chief trouble consists in determining the meaning and the construction of the middle form in the expression **לְרִאוֹת כְּבָלַע אֶת־הַקֹּדֶשׁ**, which the Septuagint translators, as shown in their rendering *ἰδεῖν ἐξάπινα τὰ ἅγια* ('to look suddenly on the holy things') obviously associated, adverbially, with the preceding infinitive; and this view has been taken by our Revisers. The ancient and the modern interpreters alike—the latter probably following the lead of the former—have evidently given undue prominence to what is

⁵ The idea of close personal service ever attached to the root **שָׂרַת** is further apparent when mention is made of other than priestly service performed by honored and trusted attendants, who had constant intercourse with their masters. Thus, Joshua is called the 'minister' (**קִשְׂרָת**) of Moses (Ex. 24:13, 33:11; Josh. 1:1); Joseph became the confidential servant of Potiphar, to whom he 'ministered' (Gen. 39:4), and even in prison was entrusted with the custody of Pharaoh's chief butler and baker, thus becoming their constant personal attendant or superior servant (Gen. 40:4); the wicked Amnon has such a 'minister' (II Sam. 13:17, 18); Solomon had such a plurality of 'ministers' (I Kings 10:5); and similar ministrations were that of Elisha in relation to El

merely a subordinate element in the meaning of the root בלע ('to swallow' or 'engulf'), viz. *suddenness* of disappearance from view, and have attached the form, syntactically, as an adverb, to the preceding verb. On the other hand, the Older English translators, as shown by their rendering, 'to see where the holy things are covered,' had regard, more reasonably, to the main idea of *complete envelopment*,⁶ and more naturally and grammatically construed the verb-form כַּבֵּלַע with the accusative following; for the complete expression of thought, however, it is necessary mentally to supply the subject הַכֹּהֲנִים as the name of the agents in covering the sanctuary and its furniture.

At the close of the verse, וְמָתוּ must be corrected into its resemblant וְמָשׂוּ, as already shown in verse 15.

After effecting the emendations indicated, verses 18, 19, 20 may be freely rendered thus:—

18. Do not bring near the families of the Kohathites, from among the Levites, to intimate ministrations.
19. But this shall ye do to them, that they may live and not die when they approach the holy of holies: Aaron and his sons shall go in and shall appoint them, each one, to his service and to his burden;
20. But they shall not go in to see when [the priests] envelop the Sanctuary, nor handle [the sacred vessels].

⁶ A similar view, expressed somewhat paraphrastically, however, is indicated in the Latin Vulgate: *Alii nulla curiositate videant quae sunt in sanctuario priusquam involvantur.*