

CHAPTER 17

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS 17

In this chapter the priesthood of Aaron is further confirmed and established by the budding and blossom of his rod, as it lay among the princes of the several tribes, when theirs did not, (^{<0470>}Numbers 17:1-9); which rod of Aaron was ordered to be laid up before the ark, as a token against the rebels, and to put an end to all murmurings against Aaron for the future; which was accordingly done, (^{<0471>}Numbers 17:10,11); upon which the people expressed their fear of perishing because of their sins, (^{<0472>}Numbers 17:12,13).

Ver. 1. *And the Lord spake unto Moses*, etc.] After the plague ceased, for the further confirmation of the priesthood in Aaron's family, another method is directed to by the Lord:

saying: as follows.

Ver. 2. *Speak unto the children of Israel*, etc.] The principal men among them of the several tribes:

and take of everyone of them; not of every individual of the people of Israel, but of their princes, as afterwards explained:

a rod, according to the house of [their] fathers; or "father", of whom their house or tribe was called, as Reuben, Simeon, etc. this rod was either a common walking staff, as some think, or rather the ensign of their princely office and dignity, peculiar to each tribe; though some think it was now freshly cut off from an almond tree, and that all the rods were of one and the same tree; but supposing they were all of the almond kind, as Josephus ^{f239} thinks, yet being dry rods, and of long use, served to make the miracle appear the greater:

of all their princes, according to the house of their fathers, twelve rods; this explains who they were to be taken of, the princes of the several tribes, whose names are given, (^{<0405>}Numbers 1:5-15); and the number of them twelve, according to the number of the twelve tribes:

write thou every man's name upon his rod; the name of each prince, or head of a tribe, either by cutting it into the rod, or fastening a writing to it, after the manner of those times; as, for instance, the name of Elizur for the tribe of Reuben; by which it was to be made and was made to appear, that to none of these tribes belonged the priesthood, but to the tribe of Levi, and to none of that tribe but the family of Aaron; whereby it should seem that some of all the tribes made pretensions to it, as being all holy, and especially the chief firstborn of every tribe, as such their princes were.

Ver. 3. *And thou shalt write Aaron's name upon the rod of Levi*, etc.] Or upon the rod that was for the tribe of Levi; the name of "Aaron" was to be written, not the word "Levi", or a "Levite", as Josephus^{f240}; for that would not have decided the controversy about the priesthood, which chiefly lay between the Levites and the family of Aaron, who were of the same tribe:

for one rod [shall be] for the head of the house of their fathers; one rod for the head or prince of every tribe, every prince representing his own tribe he was the head of, and the rod the prince; and though the tribe of Levi was divided into two families, the family of the priests, and the family of the Levites; yet, as Jarchi observes, they were but one tribe, and so one rod for them, as for the other tribes.

Ver. 4. *And thou shalt lay them up in the tabernacle of the congregation*, etc.] In the most holy place:

before the testimony; that is, the ark in which the testimony or the law was; here they were laid as in the presence of God, who was in a miraculous way to decide the controversy by them, and put an end to it; for upon the ark was the mercy seat, over which were the cherubim, the seat of the divine Majesty, and where none could come at them, and where no fraud could be supposed to be committed:

where I will meet with you; not with the people in person, who might not go at any time into the most holy place; nor with Aaron, who only might go into it on the day of atonement; but with Moses, the chief ruler and representative of the whole body of the people, and who might go in there at any time, to consult with God about matters of moment and difficulty, and where the Lord had said he would meet him, (⁽¹²⁵²⁾Exodus 25:22); and now would, in a miraculous way, clearly show him, and the people of Israel by him, who was the priest he had chosen of all the tribes.

Ver. 5. *And it shall come to pass, that the man's rod whom I shall choose,* etc.] Or make it manifest that he had chosen him, and so confirm the choice he had made of him and his family, for the priesthood to be and continue in:

shall blossom; bud and blossom, and yield fruit, as it afterwards did, which is here declared beforehand, that the miracle might appear the greater, exactly answering to a prediction delivered out before of it:

and I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you; against Moses for setting up his brother as an high priest, and establishing the priesthood in his family; and against Aaron for accepting of it, and officiating in it; but by this method now taken, God would for ever silence their murmurings, so that they should never be able, with any face, to object any more to the authority of the Aaronic priesthood, which should appear by the predicted miracle beyond all dispute and contradiction.

Ver. 6. *And Moses spake unto the children of Israel,* etc.] What the Lord had bid him say unto them concerning the rods, which they hearkened unto and observed:

and everyone of their princes gave him a rod apiece, for each prince one; every prince of the several tribes, and so a rod for every tribe, as well as for each prince:

according to their father's houses, [even] twelve rods; there being twelve tribes named after their fathers, or the patriarchs, the twelve sons of Jacob; and Joseph having two tribes which sprung from him, called after his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, there were twelve rods besides that of Aaron; and so the Vulgate Latin version renders the words with the next clause,

“and there were twelve rods besides the rod of Aaron;”

in all thirteen; though the Jews say there were but twelve with it, allowing but one rod for Joseph, under whom were comprehended Ephraim and Manasseh, and reckoning the tribe of Levi one of the twelve so Aben Ezra observes, that the rod of Levi was among the twelve and Joseph had but one rod:

and the rod of Aaron [was] among their rods: in the middle of them, and was so placed, as Jarchi thinks, that it might not be said, because it was put

on the side of the Shechinah or divine Majesty, therefore it budded; but being in the middle of them there could be no difference in that respect.

Ver. 7. *And Moses laid up the rods before the Lord in the tabernacle of witness.*] In that part of the tabernacle where the testimony or witness was, that is, the law, which was in the ark, over which was the mercy seat, with the cherubim between which Jehovah dwelt, and this was the most holy place; and the rods being laid here, might be said to be laid before the Lord, who, by making a difference in one of those rods from the rest, would decide the controversy about the priesthood, which was the end of their being laid before him.

Ver. 8. *And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness,* etc.] Where none but he could go at any time; this was the day after the rods had been placed there:

and, behold, the rod of Aaron, for the house of Levi; the rod that had Aaron's name upon it, which was to represent the tribe of Levi, of which he was:

was budded, and brought forth buds; knobs of blossom, such that are seen on trees before they open; for the almond tree puts forth its blossoms before its leaves; though the Targum of Jonathan renders it "branches", as do some versions; and some think this is to be understood of its putting out its leaves first, contrary to the nature of the almond tree, and so makes the miracle the greater; thus Ben Melech:

and blossomed blossoms; open flowers or blossoms, such as appear on the almond tree in the spring, and look very beautiful:

and yielded almonds; ripe almonds, in their full perfection, as the Targums of Jerusalem and Jonathan; the latter of which is,

"in the same night it perfected and brought forth almonds:"

the word used has the signification of weaning, and alludes to children grown up to some ripeness and maturity, (⁰¹²¹⁸Genesis 21:8); the case seems to be this, that in one part of the rod were buds, swelling and just putting out, in another part open flowers quite blown, and in others full ripe fruit: now this clearly showed it to be supernatural, since the almond tree, though quick and early in its production of buds and flowers, yet never has those and ripe fruit on it at the same time; to which may be added, that this

was not the time of year the almond tree blossoms; not the spring, but rather autumn, as it should seem, since it was after the affair of the spies and the murmurs of the people on their report; now it was the time of the first ripe grapes, when they went into the land, and they were forty days searching it, and it was after their return the insurrections before recorded were: the design of this was to confirm the priesthood in Aaron's family, and show that it would continue there, in a flourishing condition, and that there would be a succession of priests from him to the time of the Messiah, as there were; and the almond tree having its name in Hebrew from watchfulness and haste, (see ²⁰¹¹Jeremiah 1:11,12); may denote the vigilance of the priests in their office, and the haste punishment makes to come upon such that should oppose them, or usurp the priesthood, as in the case of Uzziah; so Jarchi remarks: this rod of Aaron's may be an emblem of the Gospel ministry of that rod that should come out of Zion, (¹⁸¹⁰Psalm 110:2); which in the eyes of men is mean and despicable, like a dry stick, but becomes a fruitful one through the power of divine grace; and an almond tree rod may denote the vigilance and watchfulness of Gospel ministers over themselves and others, and their doctrine; and oftentimes whom God puts into the ministry he early calls them by his grace, and frequently makes the first part of their ministry most useful, and fruit is brought forth which remains: moreover, this rod may be considered as a type of Christ; it being a dry rod or stick, may denote the meanness of his descent and appearance in the world, and the unpromising aspect of his being the King, Messiah, and Saviour of men; and being an almond tree rod, may signify his speedy incarnation in the fulness of time, which the Lord hastened; his being the firstborn, and his right to the priesthood, and his vigilance in it; its lying among other rods, and budding, and blossoming, and bringing forth fruit, may point at Christ's assuming the common nature or man, his being cut off by death, his resurrection from the dead, and the fruits arising from thence, justification, peace, pardon, and eternal life; and as Aaron's priesthood was confirmed by the budding, etc. of this rod, so the deity and Messiahship of Christ are, by his resurrection from the dead; (see Gill on ¹⁸⁰⁰Hebrews 9:4").

Ver. 9. *And Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord, unto all the children of Israel,* etc.] He brought them out of the holy place, and showed them to the princes of the several tribes:

and they looked, and took every man his rod; which they knew by their names upon them; by their own handwriting, as Aben Ezra; for though

Moses is bid to write their names on them, (^{-047D}Numbers 17:2,3); yet no more may be meant by that than that he should order them to be written, and take care that they were.

Ver. 10. *And the Lord said unto Moses*, etc.] After the rods had been viewed, and every prince took his rod, and full satisfaction was given that the priesthood belonged to Aaron, by the budding and blossoming of his rod, when the rest remained as they were:

bring Aaron's rod again before the testimony; before the ark, in which the testimony or law was; here it was placed and continued, but how long cannot be said with certainty; no doubt for many ages; which increases the wonder, that it should, as it probably did, continue with its buds, blossoms, and fruit on it: the apostle speaks of it, as in the holy of holies, with the ark, the pot of manna, and the tables of the covenant, (^{-300E}Hebrews 9:4); the Jews say ^{f241}, that when Josiah the king ordered the ark to be laid up in that place which Solomon had built, that it might not be carried with the captives into captivity, as it is said, (^{-488B}2 Chronicles 35:3), “put the holy ark”, etc. they hid with the ark the rod of Aaron, and the pot of manna, and the anointing oil, and which were not in the second temple; and they say ^{f242}, particularly of Aaron's rod, that at the time it was laid up by Josiah it had its buds and almonds: now this was ordered to be put in the most holy place before the ark:

to be kept for a token against the rebels; to be a token of their sin and wickedness in rebelling against God, his ordinance and ministers; which occasioned this miracle to be wrought, for the confirmation of the priesthood in Aaron's family, which they opposed, and to be a caution to others not to attempt anything against it for the future; so Christ and the Gospel ministry will be swift witnesses against the opposers of him and that; (see ^{-308E}Malachi 3:5 ^{-488E}John 3:19);

and thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me, that they die not; quite silence all the murmurings of the people with respect to the priesthood being so fully convinced by this miracle of the divine authority Aaron and his family had to exercise the priestly office, and they only, and so such destruction of the people be prevented as had been lately made.

Ver. 11. *And Moses did so; as the Lord commanded him, even so did he.*] Took Aaron's rod, and laid it up before the ark for the purpose mentioned, being a faithful servant to God in all his house.

Ver. 12. *And the children of Israel spake unto Moses*, etc.] The princes of the tribes, who had seen the miracle of the rod, and knew that it was laid up in the most holy place, and for what purpose, which gave them a sensible concern: these, and as many as were acquainted with it, addressed Moses upon it, as follows:

saying, behold, we die, we perish, we all perish; which being expressed without the copulative, and in different words, show that they were spoken quick and in haste, and discover the passion of mind and distress they were in, and the sense they had of their sin and danger, fearing they should all die and perish, as many had already; it has respect, as some think, to punishments past and future, so the Targum of Jonathan,

“some of us have been consumed by flaming fire, and others of us have been swallowed up in the earth and are lost, and, lo, we are accounted as if all of us would perish.”

Ver. 13. *Whosoever cometh anything near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die*, etc.] They who before were so bold and daring as to think the priesthood was common to them with Aaron, or they had as good a right to it, and might go into the sanctuary of the Lord where he did, are now so frightened at the rod being laid up as a token against them, that they thought they must not come near the tabernacle at all, and, if they did, would be in the utmost danger of death:

shall we be consumed with dying? such violent deaths, until there are none left of us? but the Syriac and Arabic versions render the words affirmatively; we are near or about to be consumed; and so the Targum of Onkelos, lo, we are to be consumed; which agrees best with the preceding clause, for they would scarcely make a question of what they had affirmed.