

Levite

Pentateuch. The Hebrew word for Levite (lew") indicates a descendant of Levi, the son of Jacob and Leah (Gen 29:34). There were three family clans within the tribe of Levi — Gershon, Kohath, and Merari but it was only Kohath who supplied the Aaronic priests. Subsequent to the induction of Aaron and his sons into the priesthood, the entire tribe of Levi was "set apart" following the golden calf incident (Exod 32:26-29). They were blessed and chosen because their actions signified their loyalty to the covenant. Thus, the prophecy of Jacob that Levi's descendants would be scattered throughout Israel (Gen 49:5-7) was fulfilled, not as a curse but as a blessing (Exod 32:29 ; Deut 33:8-9).

Their zeal for the Lord caused the male Levites (except for Aaron's family, who were already designated as priests) to be set apart as caretakers of the tabernacle and as aides to the priests (Num 1:47-53). Each clan in the tribe now had specific duties related to the tabernacle (Num 3:14-18). Because this appointment came about due to their actions and was not based on their relationship with Aaron or his family, it was "provisionally coincidental" that it was the tribe that contained the priests. Because of this a progression can be demonstrated in terms of separation and responsibilities from nation to tribe (Levi) to priesthood.

The Levites' "set apart" status is demonstrated by their taking the place of the firstborn, who by right belonged to God (Num 3:41). Another indication of Levi's distinction is found in Numbers 1:47-54, where God instructs Moses not to number the Levites with the other tribes. The Levites were set apart but their status must still be seen as significantly different from that of the priests (even though all priests were Levites too). As aides, not officiating priests, theirs is an intermediate status between the people in general and that of the priesthood (i.e., the priests were made holy, the Levites were made clean; the priests were

anointed and washed, the Levites were sprinkled; the priests were given new garments, the Levites washed theirs; blood was applied to the priests, but was waved over the Levites). The Levites were explicitly permitted to go near the Tent of Meeting, and this special privilege more than any other duty distinguished them from ordinary Israelites (Num 8:19 ; 16:9-10).

Part of the support of the Levites was to come from the tithe they were to be allotted of the income of the other tribes (Num 18:20-25). Since the reception of this tithe was dependent on the faithfulness of all the people, the financial position of the Levite was unpredictable. The Levites are therefore included in the legislation, along with the aliens, fatherless, and widows, as those whom the people must remember to care for (Deut 12:19 ; 14:27-29).

In Deuteronomy, with a view to entering the land, the Levites were given an additional duty since their tabernacle transport obligations would be diminished. It was now the important duty of the Levites and the levitical priests, who would live throughout the land, to instruct the people in the law (Deut 33:10).

Preexilic Historical Books. At the conquest the Levites received no tribal inheritance but were given forty-eight cities with their pastures (Joshua 21:1-42). This along with the tithe was to be their means of support as they pursued their work as aides to the priests and helpers at the sanctuary. This lack of land inheritance is to be understood by the statement that "the priestly service of the Lord is their inheritance" (Joshua 18:7).

During the temple period, with the ark permanently in Jerusalem and in view of their numbers, the Levites were given additional responsibilities as officials, judges, gatekeepers, and musicians, all of which assisted the priests (1 Chron 23:4-5).

They also continued to serve as teachers and administrators of the law. That function was not always carried out well; hence the need for specific times of teaching (2 Chron 17:7-9 ; 35:3).

Postexilic Historical Books. While 4, 289 priests (approximately one-tenth of the entire returning number of exiles) returned from captivity with Zerubbabel, only 341 Levites, singers, and gatekeepers are recorded as returning (Ezra 2:36-58). Ezra succeeded in persuading only thirty-eight Levites to return with him (Ezra 8:15-19).

The fact that many of the menial tasks of temple service were the responsibility of the Levites and that the temple first had to be rebuilt and when it was, it was not as glorious as Solomon's temple (Ezra 3:12), may have affected the willingness of the Levites to return. Some of the Levites became involved, however, in the interpretation and teaching of the law (Neh 8:7-8) and in the leading of the people in worship (Neh 9:4-5 ; Nehemiah 12:8-9 Nehemiah 12:27-47).

Prophets. Though rarely referred to in the prophets, and even then usually in the context of priests who are Levites, the Levites as distinct from the Zadokite priests are mentioned in Ezekiel 44:11. The future acquisition and redistribution of the land would include a specific area in which the Levites could live (Eze 45:5).

The New Testament. The term "Levite(s)" is only used three times in the New Testament. They were still a distinct class connected to the temple in Jerusalem along with the priests (John 1:19). As teachers of the law, the Levites, together with the priests, were probably sent with this role in mind, to question John the Baptist. It is possible that many scribes were Levites. In the parable of the good Samaritan both a priest and Levite are mentioned, though not in a commendable manner (Luke 10:31-32). Barnabas is referred to as a Levite (Acts 4:36).

In summary, though the conclusions of the majority of modern critical scholars concerning the identity and purpose of the Levites (and priests) are in sharp contrast to the view presented here, the Scriptures clearly indicate that the Levites should be seen as a tribe that was below the priestly group of Aaronic priests but still distinct from other Israelites.

They were "set apart, " handled the sacred articles of the tabernacle, served as substitutes for the firstborn who belonged to God, taught the law of God, served as judges, enhanced the worship at the temple in music, and guarded the treasures and moneys associated with the temple, but did not serve as mediators of the covenant. Their significant contribution was that they made it possible for the people to worship and fulfill their obligations to God.

Along with the honor that the Levites had in their unique appointment, there was the need for their total dedication to the work of the Lord, not that of pursuing material gain, and the necessity to look to him to supply some of their needs through the people. It was a life of sacrifice and service with their service to the Lord being their valuable inheritance that they could pass on to the next generation. They did not always value their function and inheritance, as evidenced after the exile.