
The Levitical Priesthood

According to **Numbers 16:5** the Levitical priests were commissioned by God, separated unto God, and were allowed to approach God.

"Then he said to Korah and all his followers: 'In the morning the Lord will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him.'"

The Levitical priesthood began with the tribe of Levi and proceeded through the sons of the family of Aaron, according to **Numbers 18:1,8** and **Exodus 28:1**, which says

"Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests."

However, physical blemishes disqualified any male descendant of Aaron, according to

Leviticus 21:17-23

17 "Speak to Aaron, saying: 'No man of your descendants in succeeding generations, who has any defect, may approach to offer the bread of his God.

18 For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred face or any limb too long,

19 a man who has a broken foot or broken hand,

20 or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch.

21 No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest, who has a defect, shall come near to offer the offerings made by fire to the Lord. He has a defect; he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God.

22 He may eat the bread of his God, both the most holy and the holy;

23 only he shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I the Lord sanctify them.' "

The duties of the Levitical priesthood included:

The teaching of the Law

Leviticus 10:11

and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses."

Offering the sacrifices

READ Leviticus chapter 9

Maintaining the Tabernacle and the Temple

Numbers 18:3

They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die—they and you also.

Officiating in the Holy Place

Exodus 30:7-10

7 "Aaron shall burn on it sweet incense every morning; when he tends the lamps, he shall burn incense on it.

8 And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense on it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations.

9 You shall not offer strange incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering; nor shall you pour a drink offering on it.

10 And Aaron shall make atonement upon its horns once a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonement; once a year he shall make atonement upon it throughout your generations. It is most holy to the Lord.”

Inspecting ceremonially unclean persons

READ Leviticus chapters 13 and 14

They adjudicated disputes

Deuteronomy 17:8-13

8 “If a matter arises which is too hard for you to judge, between degrees of guilt for bloodshed, between one judgment or another, or between one punishment or another, matters of controversy within your gates, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the Lord your God chooses.

9 And you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge there in those days, and inquire of them; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment.

10 You shall do according to the sentence which they pronounce upon you in that place which the Lord chooses. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they order you.

11 According to the sentence of the law in which they instruct you, according to the judgment which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left from the sentence which they pronounce upon you.

12 Now the man who acts presumptuously and will not heed the priest who stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall put away the evil from Israel.

13 And all the people shall hear and fear, and no longer act presumptuously.

They functioned as tax collectors

Numbers 18:21,26

21 “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.

26 “Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: ‘When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to the Lord, a tenth of the tithe.

Hebrews 7:5

And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham;

Sustenance of the priesthood occurred through the following vehicles:

Prescribed portions of the sacrificial offerings

Numbers 18:8-14

8 And the Lord spoke to Aaron: “Here, I Myself have also given you charge of My heave offerings, all the holy gifts of the children of Israel; I have given them as a portion to you and your sons, as an ordinance forever.

9 This shall be yours of the most holy things reserved from the fire: every offering of theirs, every grain offering and every sin offering and every trespass offering which they render to Me, shall be most holy for you and your sons.

10 In a most holy place you shall eat it; every male shall eat it. It shall be holy to you.

11 "This also is yours: the heave offering of their gift, with all the wave offerings of the children of Israel; I have given them to you, and your sons and daughters with you, as an ordinance forever. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it.

12 "All the best of the oil, all the best of the new wine and the grain, their firstfruits which they offer to the Lord, I have given them to you.

13 Whatever first ripe fruit is in their land, which they bring to the Lord, shall be yours. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it.

14 "Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.

One habitual tithe from which tithe a tenth part was assigned to the priests

Numbers 18:21-24

21 "Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.

22 Hereafter the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die.

23 But the Levites shall perform the work of the tabernacle of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute forever, throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.

24 For the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the Lord, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, 'Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.'

Leviticus 27:30-33

30 And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord's. It is holy to the Lord.

31 If a man wants at all to redeem any of his tithes, he shall add one-fifth to it.

32 And concerning the tithe of the herd or the flock, of whatever passes under the rod, the tenth one shall be holy to the Lord.

33 He shall not inquire whether it is good or bad, nor shall he exchange it; and if he exchanges it at all, then both it and the one exchanged for it shall be holy; it shall not be redeemed.' "

Numbers 18:26-28

26 "Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: 'When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to the Lord, a tenth of the tithe.

27 And your heave offering shall be reckoned to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor and as the fullness of the winepress.

28 Thus you shall also offer a heave offering to the Lord from all your tithes which you receive from the children of Israel, and you shall give the Lord's heave offering from it to Aaron the priest.

Along with thirteen assigned cities...

Joshua 21:13-19

13 Thus to the children of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Libnah with its common-land,

14 Jattir with its common-land, Eshtemoa with its common-land,

15 Holon with its common-land, Debir with its common-land,

16 Ain with its common-land, Juttah with its common-land, and Beth Shemesh with its common-land: nine cities from those two tribes;

17 and from the tribe of Benjamin, Gibeon with its common-land, Geba with its common-land,

18 Anathoth with its common-land, and Almon with its common-land: four cities.

19 All the cities of the children of Aaron, the priests, were thirteen cities with their common-lands.

which provided a special tithe every third year,

Deuteronomy 14:27-29

27 You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no part nor inheritance with you.

28 "At the end of every third year you shall bring out the tithe of your produce of that year and store it up within your gates.

29 And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.

Deuteronomy 26:12

"When you have finished laying aside all the tithe of your increase in the third year—the year of tithing—and have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your gates and be filled,

The redemption money for the firstborn in Israel

READ Leviticus chapter 27

An assigned portion of the spoils of war

Numbers 31:25-27

25 Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

26 "Count up the plunder that was taken—of man and beast—you and Eleazar the priest and the chief fathers of the congregation;

27 and divide the plunder into two parts, between those who took part in the war, who went out to battle, and all the congregation.

The showbread

Leviticus 24:5-9

5 "And you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it. Two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake.

6 You shall set them in two rows, six in a row, on the pure gold table before the Lord.

7 And you shall put pure frankincense on each row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, an offering made by fire to the Lord.

8 Every Sabbath he shall set it in order before the Lord continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant.

9 And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the offerings of the Lord made by fire, by a perpetual statute.”

And so that the priests would not be overworked, they were assigned assistants who were called the Levites.

2 Chronicles 29:34

But the priests were too few, so that they could not skin all the burnt offerings; therefore their brethren the Levites helped them until the work was ended and until the other priests had sanctified themselves, for the Levites were more diligent in sanctifying themselves than the priests.

The Levites were selected by God to aid in the sacrificial offerings and in the administration of holy things, according to

Numbers 3:5-10

5 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

6 “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him.

7 And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle.

8 Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle.

9 And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are given entirely to him from among the children of Israel.

10 So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall attend to their priesthood; but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

Numbers 8:14-19

14 Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine.

15 After that the Levites shall go in to service the tabernacle of meeting. So you shall cleanse them and offer them like a wave offering.

16 For they are wholly given to Me from among the children of Israel; I have taken them for Myself instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel.

17 For all the firstborn among the children of Israel are Mine, both man and beast; on the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to Myself.

18 I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn of the children of Israel.

19 And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the work for the children of Israel in the tabernacle of meeting, and to make atonement for the children of Israel, that there be no plague among the children of Israel when the children of Israel come near the sanctuary.”

The Levites also preserved and transmitted the written Law.

Leviticus 10:11

and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.”

Deuteronomy 17:18

Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites.

Deuteronomy 33:10

They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, And Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, And a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar.

Nehemiah 8:9

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.

Ezekiel 44:23

And they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean.

They attended the priests.

Numbers 18:4

They shall be joined with you and attend to the needs of the tabernacle of meeting, for all the work of the tabernacle; but an outsider shall not come near you.

The Levites also were responsible for assembling, dismantling, and transporting the Tabernacle'

READ Numbers 4**Numbers 10:17,21**

17 Then the tabernacle was taken down; and the sons of Gershon and the sons of Merari set out, carrying the tabernacle.

21 Then the Kohathites set out, carrying the holy things. (The tabernacle would be prepared for their arrival.)

And they also taught the Torah (the word) and administered justice.

Deuteronomy 33:10

They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, And Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, And a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar.

Levitical priests usually served for 25 years, from age 25 to age 50, according to

Numbers 8:24,25

24 "This is what pertains to the Levites: From twenty-five years old and above one may enter to perform service in the work of the tabernacle of meeting;

25 and at the age of fifty years they must cease performing this work, and shall work no more.

At times older men were priests, e.g. Zacharias, **Luke 1:5-25**.

Other than the family of Aaron, there were three other family lines in the tribe of Levi (Numbers chapter 4): the Kohathites, who maintained the furniture, vessels and veil of the Tabernacle; the Gershonites, who maintained the coverings, hangings and doors of the Tabernacle; the Merarites, who maintained the supports, including the planks bars and cords, of the Tabernacle.

Initially, God had selected the entire nation of Israel to be his priests, according to

Exodus 19:5,6

5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.

6 And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

After the nation proved to be inadequate as priests,

Exodus 32:7-10

7 And the Lord said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.

8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!' "

9 And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!

10 Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation."

the Levites who supported Moses in Exodus chapters 26-28 were selected as God's priests,

Numbers 3:5-9

5 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

6 "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him.

7 And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle.

8 Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle.

9 And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are given entirely to him from among the children of Israel.

The apparel of the high priest is cited in Exodus chapter 28. Both the priests and the high priest, except for ceremonial events, dressed as other Jews. At ceremonial events, however, the high priest wore white linen shorts, a white linen coat that came to the hips, a ceremonial belt colored in correspondence to the curtains of the Tabernacle -- white, blue, scarlet, and purple; he also wore a turban-like cap with a golden crown, upon which was inscribed: 'holy to Jehovah.' Additionally, the high priest wore an ephod of blue, beautifully embroidered in the colors cited above; also a breast-plate of gold and cloth, with the urim and the thummim on the shoulders, and twelve stones, each stone representing one of the twelve tribes; each stone was engraved with their names and fastened with a golden clasp.

The sanctification of the high priest and the priests is found in Exodus chapter 29. And the principal duty of the high priest was to officiate on the Day of Atonement, according to Leviticus chapter 16. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest, caparisoned in his ceremonial garments, 'drew near to God;' he entered the Tabernacle (or later the Temple), and sprinkled over the top of the mercy seat the blood of the bullock of the sin offering for himself.

Leviticus 16:6,14

6 "Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering, which is for himself, and make atonement for himself and for his house.

14 He shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; and before the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.

After he came forth from the Holy of Holies, he again entered and sprinkled the blood of the goat of the sin offering for the people. Both times he emerged from the Holy of Holies after sprinkling the blood had hamartiological (sin) ramifications: pardon for his personal sins, and pardon for the sins of the people; and in each instance the pardon was based solely upon the 'blood of the sin offering,' which represented Christ on the Cross.

Leviticus 16:30

For on that day *the priest* shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, *that* you may be clean from all your sins before the LORD.

According to **1 Chronicles chapter 15, 16:4-6, 37-43**, David rearranged the Levitical priesthood into 24 courses (orders); he assigned 16 courses to Eleazar, and 8 courses to Ithamar. This rearrangement was chartered because of a population explosion in David's reign.

According to Numbers 20:28, the office of the high priest was transmitted upon death to the oldest living son of the high priest:

"Moses removed Aaron's garments and put them on his son Eleazar. And Aaron died there on top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain."

God made a covenant with Phinehas, the eldest son of Eleazar, which guaranteed a lasting priesthood with the Aaronic line.

Numbers 25:10-13

10 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

11 "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal.

12 Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace;

13 and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.' "

The line switched during Saul ben-Kish's reign; Eli, a descendant of Ithamar, assumed the office of high-priest, however, he functioned only de facto and not de jure (legally). In fact, his descendants were removed from the priesthood because of Eli's failure to censure his sons.

1 Samuel 2:23-25

23 So he said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people.

24 No, my sons! For it is not a good report that I hear. You make the Lord's people transgress.

25 If one man sins against another, God will judge him. But if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?" Nevertheless they did not heed the voice of their father, because the Lord desired to kill them.

1 Samuel 3:13

For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them.

Solomon restored the Aaronic line to the high-priesthood; he replaced Abiathar, Eli's descendant, with Zadok, from the line of Eleazar.

1 Kings 2:26,27,35

26 And to Abiathar the priest the king said, "Go to Anathoth, to your own fields, for you are deserving of death; but I will not put you to death at this time, because you carried the ark of the Lord God before my father David, and because you were afflicted every time my father was afflicted."

27 So Solomon removed Abiathar from being priest to the Lord, that he might fulfill the word of the Lord which He spoke concerning the house of Eli at Shiloh.

35 The king put Benaiah the son of Jehoiada in his place over the army, and the king put Zadok the priest in the place of Abiathar.

During the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah, Seraiah was the high-priest; he was taken prisoner and executed by Nebuzar-adan

2 Kings 25:18-21

18 And the captain of the guard took Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the second priest, and the three doorkeepers.

19 He also took out of the city an officer who had charge of the men of war, five men of the king's close associates who were found in the city, the chief recruiting officer of the army, who mustered the people of the land, and sixty men of the people of the land who were found in the city.

20 So Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, took these and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah.

21 Then the king of Babylon struck them and put them to death at Riblah in the land of Hamath. Thus Judah was carried away captive from its own land.

Seraiah's son, Josedech, was not allowed to function as high-priest. Instead, he lived and died as a prisoner in Babylon.

Haggai 1:1,14

1 In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying,

14 So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God,

Josedech's son, Joshua, functioned as the high-priest during the ministry of Zechariah.

Zechariah 3:1

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him.

The high-priests that followed Joshua were: Joiakim, Eliashib, Joiada, Johanan and Jaddua, who was the high-priest in the epoch of Alexander the Great. Tradition holds that Jaddua met the advancing armies of Alexander with the scroll of the book of Daniel, whereupon he read Alexander those passages in Daniel referring to Alexander. Alexander was impressed and, tradition maintains, favorably disposed toward the Jews from then on.

Jaddua's successors were: Onias I, Simon the Just; Onias II/Eleazar, and Alcimus. The latter two, Onias II and Alcimus, were notorious for their malfunction; indeed, Onias II was also known as Menelaus.

The high-priestly line passed over to the Hasmonaean family, the course of Joiarib. It stayed in the Hasmonean family until Herod the Great decimated the Hasmonean family, and his brother-in-law, Herod, executed the final Hasmonean high-priest, Aristobulus, in 35 BC.

1 Chronicles 9:10

Of the priests: Jedaiah, Jehoiarib, and Jachin;

1 Chronicles 24:7

Now the first lot fell to Jehoiarib, the second to Jedaiah,

Nehemiah 11:10

Of the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, and Jachin;

At length, the two high priests associated with the death of our Lord were Caiaphas and Annas.
