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The Separation of the Levites

8: 5-26

The separation of the Levites DIG: What does it mean to be “set apart?” What were the responsibilities for the Levites? How were they set apart? How do people today get chosen and ready for spiritual service? What role has God given you in His Kingdom? Have you been faithful in what He has called you to do? How does this setting apart of the Levites compare with how the Nazirites were set apart in Chapter 6.

REFLECT: What are the dangers of becoming isolated from the real world? When we feel competitive, prideful, or shameful in our spiritual service, what can we learn from God’s choice of the priests and Levites? What role has God given you in His Kingdom? Ask the Lord to show you what role He has for you, and how to be faithful in that role. How can we keep a balance between separation and involvement?

The entire tribe of Levi was to assist the priests in their ministry.

Throughout these early chapters of **Numbers** there is a topical presentation rather than a chronological arrangement of the material. They have been telling us the story of **the Israelite’s** preparations to leave Mount Sinai. In the first four chapters of **Numbers**, **they** took a census (**to see link click [An](#) - The Levitical Census**) and assigned **the Levites** to **their** various tasks (see **[Ar](#) - The Four Camps of Levites**). **Numbers 7-10** is a flashback and relates how **Isra’el** was ready to depart from Mount Sinai. The setting aside of **the Levites (8:26)** presumably followed immediately after **the twelve days** of **gifts** by the **twelve tribes** (see **[Be](#) - Gifts of the Twelve Tribes**), perhaps on **the thirteenth day of the month**.



The Levites had redeemed **the Israelite firstborn** (see [Ap - Redeeming the Firstborn](#)) and had been assigned other duties of guarding (3:14-39) and removing (4:1-33) **the Tabernacle**. But before **the Levite** workforce is permitted to dismantle and handle the holy things, they must be ritually qualified, which requires that it be purified of impurities such as contact with the dead. This **purification**, however, should not be compared with the ordination ceremony of **the priests** (Lev 8:1-36), who were consecrated with **anointing oil** (see the commentary on [Exodus Ge - The Dedication of Aaron and His Family](#)), in order to gain a holy status so that **they** could have access to the sacred objects, that is to officiate at the bronze altar and enter the Sanctuary. **The Levites**, on the other hand, were forbidden to enter the Sanctuary or officiate at the bronze altar (18:3-4). **Their** ministry was only to assist **the priests** in their duties, to guard **the Tabernacle**, and transport **it** and **its** sacred objects after they were covered by **the priests**.¹²⁸

These verses are displayed in a chiastic fashion (see [Ac - Numbers from a Messianic Jewish Perspective: Chiasm and introversion](#)). This section of Scripture is symmetrically balanced (AB-BA), with the singular rationale (C) placed in the center. Though the rationale is traceable to a previous source (3:9-13), a new element is added - **the Levites** as a ransom for **the Israelites** (3:19), a factor that will play a crucial role in defining the **Levitical** responsibilities in the Sanctuary (18:23).

A. Introduction (8:5-7a): ADONAI said to Moshe, “Now set the Levites apart from the rest of the people of Isra’el and make them ceremonially clean.” During the dedication of the bronze altar, **the Levites** did not bring any **gifts**. But here, we realize that **they themselves** were to be **the gift**. The entire **tribe of Levi** was to assist **the priests** in **their** ministry of the temporary covering of sin at the bronze altar.

B. Set procedure (7b-15): Their purification service began when they were

sprinkled with **purification water and ashes** from **the red heifer** (see [De - The Red Heifer](#)). Then, like the leper at the outset of his **purification**, all **their** hair was **shaved** off of **their** entire body (**14:8**). The shaving was a **purification** ritual, apparently intending to insure that every inch of **his** flesh would be **washed** in the mikvah. But it may also have added significance of symbolizing the start of **their** term of dedication to **ADONAI**. We learned in the mitzvot of **the Nazarite** (see [Ba - The Nazarite Vow](#)) that the length of one's hair while under a vow was indicative of the length of service one had devoted to **YHVH**. Most likely, **Nazarites** began **their** vows with a clean head. Perhaps a similar reason is behind **the Levitical shave**. It was a sign of the start of their new life of service and dedication. Finally, clean-shaven and rather newborn like, **they** were to **wash their clothes** and immerse in the mikvah.¹²⁹

The sacrifices for the appointment of **the Levites** consisted of two **bulls**. **Then they are to take a young bull for a burnt offering** (see the commentary on [Leviticus Ao - The 'Olah Offering: Providing Access to God](#)), **with its** accompanying **grain offering** (see [Leviticus Ap - The Minhah: Assuring People of God's Acceptance](#)), **which is to be fine flour mixed with olive oil; while you take another bull for a purification offering** (see [Leviticus Aq - The Chatta'th Offering: Communicating God's Forgiveness](#)) (**8:8**).

A **bull** was ordinarily brought only for **the purification offering** made on behalf of **the priesthood** or **the whole community of Isra'el** ([Leviticus 4:3-20](#)).

Purification offerings made on behalf of **the community**, but not including **the priesthood**, were typically **goats** (**the bull and goat** combination of Yom Kippur represented **the priesthood** and the community, respectively). Why, then, were **the Levites** required to bring **a bull for a purification offering**? Wouldn't a **goat** have sufficed?

To understand why **the Levites** required **a bull for a purification offering**, we must first understand the two roles that **the Levites** played on behalf of **the community**. We have already learned that **the Levites** were offered to **God** as a substitute for **the firstborn of the sons of the twelve tribes**. But in addition to that, **the Levites** were to represent **all Isra'el** in matters pertaining to the holy things of **the Sanctuary** (see [8:18-19](#) below). **You are to present the Levites in front of the Tabernacle, and assemble the entire community of the people of Isra'el** (**8:9**).

Because **the Levites** were to represent **all Isra'el** in **their** service in **the Tabernacle**, **all Isra'el** needed to **lay their hands on them** to transfer that corporate identity to

them. You will present the Levites before ADONAI, the people of Isra'el will lay their hands on the Levites (8:10). How this actually happened is hard to imagine, it was probably done by individual leaders of the twelve tribes. But the meaning is clear. In the sacrificial system, a man or a woman laid their hands on the head of the animal they meant to **sacrifice** in order to transfer their identity to the animal, **that it may be accepted for [the offeror] to make atonement on [the offeror's] behalf (Leviticus 1:4).** The animal **sacrifice** was meant to go to the bronze altar instead of the person offering it. The same principle applied to **the Levites**. The representatives of **all the people laid their hands on the Levites**, thereby transferring the identity of **all Isra'el to them**. Thus, **the Levites** could minister in **the Tabernacle** on behalf of **the entire nation**.

Since **the Levites** were invested with the identity of **all Isra'el** (including **the priesthood** which is, technically, a part of **the Levites**), **a bull** was required for **their purification offering**, for it was not only on **their** behalf, but on behalf of **the whole nation**. As a result, the representatives of **the people laid their hands on the Levites**, and **the Levites laid their hands upon the bull**.

As **the Levites** were presented as **a gift to ADONAI** on behalf of **all Isra'el** (see below), **Aaron and Moshe** were instructed to **offer the Levites before ADONAI as a wave offering from the people of Isra'el, so that they qualify to do ADONAI's service. The Levites will lay their hands on the heads of the bulls; the one you will offer as a purification offering and the other as a burnt offering to ADONAI to make atonement for the Levites. You are to place the Levites before the priesthood, Aaron and his sons, and offer them as a wave offering to ADONAI (8:11-13).** A **wave offering** was traditionally understood to entail lifting an object before **YHVH** and **waving it** in six directions: East, South, West, North, up, and down. It is difficult to understand how **Moshe** and **Aaron** accomplished such a service with **the whole tribe of Levi**. **Rather tongue in cheek, the Midrash Rabbah comments on the amazing strength required to wave all those Levites. "When Aaron waved the Levites, he lifted 22,000 of them in one day? How did he wave them? Forward, backwards, upwards, and downward? This proves that he was a man of great strength (Leviticus Rabbah 1:26).**

We don't know the method by which **Aaron** actually waved **the Levites**. One suspects it was a token **waving** on behalf of **the whole tribe**. We do, however, know what **waving** represents. As we compare the sacrificial instructions, we see a variety of items that receive **waving**. **The gold** and **bronze** contributed for **the Tabernacle**

were **waved** (Exodus 38:24 and 29); **the barley sheaf** of the omer and **two loaves of Shavu'ot bread** were **waved** (Leviticus 23:11-17); **the memorial portion of grain offering** was waved in the ritual of the suspected adulteress (Numbers 5:25); and in every instance the priestly portions (**breast** and **right thigh**) of **the peace offerings** (see the commentary on [Leviticus Ak - The Peace Offerings: At Peace with God](#)) were **waved**. So, the items waved before **ADONAI** seem to be those things which were withheld from the bronze altar. In other words, **the wave offering** was a substitute for offering something up on the altar of **sacrifice**. Sacrificial elements were ordinarily withheld from the bronze altar because they were **the priest's portion of the sacrifices** (see [Cy - The Portion for the Levites](#)).

This interpretation makes sense in **Numbers 8**. First, **the Israelites laid hands upon the Levites** as they would upon a **sacrifice**. As stated above, **the Levites** were designated as the **sacrificial** substitutes of **the people**. Then Aaron and Moshe **waved at the Levites**. They were not to be **sacrificed**. Instead **they** were to be the property of **the priesthood**. **The Levites** were withheld from the bronze altar just as **the breast and right thigh of the peace offering** was withheld from the altar of **sacrifice**. Immediately after their waving, the head of the clans of **Levites** (Kohath, Gershon, an Merari) would lay their hands on **the two bulls** which were to go to the bronze altar of **sacrifice** instead of **the Levites**. By means of that symbolic waving, **the Levites were separated**. **In this way you will separate the Levites from the people of Isra'el, and the Levites will belong to me. After that, the Levites will enter and do the service of the tent of meeting. You will cleanse them and offer them as a wave offering (8:14-15).**¹³⁰

C. Rationale (8:16-19): Because they are entirely given to me from among the people of Isra'el; I have taken them for Myself in place of all those who come first out of the womb, that is, the firstborn males of the people of Isra'el. For all the firstborn among the people of Isra'el are mine, both humans and animals; on the day I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I set them apart for myself (8:16-17). But I have taken the Levites in place of all the firstborn among the people of Isra'el, and I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron (just as believers are a gift from Yeshua to the Father as seen in John 10:29) and his sons from among the people of Isra'el to do the service of the people of Isra'el in the Tabernacle and to make atonement [as a substitute] for the people of Isra'el, so that no plague will fall on them in consequence of their coming too close to the Sanctuary" (8:18-19). As the Levites laid their hands on the

sacrifices, so Isra'el laid **their** hands on **the Levites**, as if **they** were a living sacrifice (**Romans Dc - Responding to the Mercies of ADONAI**). Like **the Levites**, we cannot save other **people**, but we can lead **them** to our **High Priest, Yeshua Messiah**. In this anticipatory passage the need for **the Levites** to **make atonement for the people (8:19)** is resolved in **18:23**.¹³¹

B. Set Procedure (8:20-22a): This is what Moshe, Aaron and all the community of the people of Isra'el did to the Levites. The people of Isra'el acted in accordance with everything that ADONAI had ordered Moshe in regard to the Levites. The Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes (see **De - The Red Heifer**). Then Aaron offered them as a holy gift before ADONAI and made atonement for them in order to cleanse them. After that, the Levites came to do their service in the Tabernacle in front of Aaron and his sons. These verses are presented in the standard structural pattern. **Moses** (the leader-prophet), **Aaron** and **the Levites** (the priests and their assistants), and **all Isra'el** (the people) are pictured in harmony as they fulfill **God's** commands concerning the dedication and separation of the Levites.

A. conclusion (8:22b): They acted in accordance with ADONAI's orders to Moshe in regard to the Levites. This verse serves two purposes: it reports the completion of the act of **separation** as a literary device; it also reports the obedience of the people as a mark of their initial compliance to the will and work of **YHVH**.¹³²

The age of their service (8:23-36): The final section of mitzvah regarding **the Levites** in the book of **Numbers** gives the age limits for the **Levitical** labors. These figures have already been stated in the **Levitical census** of **Chapter 4**. However, the present passage is essential not only because it informs us that **the Levite** must cease from the arduous task of breaking down and setting up **the Tabernacle** when he reached **the age of fifty**, but also because it stipulates that he does not withdraw into retirement but continues to perform guard duty and teach **the people**, other duties of **the Levites**.¹³³

ADONAI said to Moshe, "Here are instructions concerning the Levites: The rabbi's understood that when they reach the age of twenty-five they would start their apprenticeship. Then, when they were thirty (4:3), they began performing their duties serving in the Tabernacle. Yeshua also began His ministry about thirty years old (Luke 3:23). David began to reign as **king** over **Judah** at the age of **thirty** (**Second Samuel 5:4**). And **Joseph** was **thirty** when he entered the service of **Pharaoh** (**Genesis 41:46**). And when they reach the age of fifty, they are to stop performing this work

and not serve any longer. The Hebrew literally reads, “Return from the warfare of the work.” In **4:3** we learn that **the Levites** were to serve from thirty **to age fifty**. For believers today, we never stop using our spiritual **gifts** to build up the Church. **They will assist their brothers** in guarding **the Tabernacle, but they themselves will not do any of the physical work. This is what you are to do with the Levites in regard to their duties.**”¹³⁴

Basically, the Levites worked under the supervision of the priesthood (Aaron’s sons Eleazar and Ithamar), and that the work of the priests and Levites was different. The priests functioned primarily inside the Sanctuary with the holy things and the Bronze Altar; while the Levites assisted the priests by guarding the outside of the Tabernacle from any encroachment by any Israelite in the camp, carrying the holy things on the march, teaching the people the Torah, being gatekeepers, singers, and also serving as judges in the cities of refuge. ADONAI knew that the priests would need reliable helpers who could assist them in their duties.

What we have seen from **Genesis** to **Numbers** is a narrowing selection from many to one. This took place in four stages. First, out of all nations, the nation of **Isra’el**, was chosen; secondly, out of the nation of **Isra’el**, **the Levites** were chosen; thirdly, out of all **the Levites**, the descendants of **Aaron** were chosen, who are to be **the priests**; and fourthly, out of all **the priests**, only one is chosen to be **the high priest**.¹³⁵

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being such an extraordinarily wonderful, loving and just Heavenly **Father**! Thank **You** also that after **Messiah** died and rose, **You** make those who love you to be **Your** priests. **You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house - a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Messiah Yeshua (First Peter 1:5).** It is such a deep joy and pleasure to bring a **sacrifice** to **You**. Thank **You** for making a way that all those who love **You**, though they are not of the Levitical line nor have taken the Nazarite vow, can offer **sacrifices** up to **You**.*

*The answer to life’s trials and problems is in the focus of our heart. When we choose to praise **You** for how wonderful **You** are, it brings great joy and peace to our whole bodies! We praise **You** that for all eternity, those who love **You** will have great joy in living with **You** in **Your** eternal home of peace and joy. **He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Nor shall there be mourning or crying or pain any longer, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21:4).** What a comfort to know that **Messiah Yeshua** is preparing a place in heaven to bring those who love **Him**. **In My Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have***

told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am you may also be (John 14:2-3).

*It is a delight to offer **You** daily **a sacrifice** of praise. Beginning the day with thoughts of praise to you and ending our day remembering **Your** Almighty power and love, is a great way to fill us up with **Your** peace. We choose to focus on **You** and not on our problems. BIG PROBLEM - small **God**, but BIG **GOD** small problem - Yes! **You** are our Big **God** who is also our loving **Father** to whom we love to offer up many **sacrifices** of praise! In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*