

## X. Sacred People: Priests & Levites

August 6, 2017

Chapters 11 & 12

**Purpose:** To understand how the Old Testament priests and Levites were selected and ordained.

**Key Verses:** <sup>1</sup>Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! <sup>2</sup>**It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!** <sup>3</sup>It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore (Psalm 133).

*Longman:* The concept of sacred people is difficult for modern Christians to understand.... As we enter the world of the Old Testament, however, it is clear that some people were considered more sacred than other people. Indeed, a whole tribe, the Levites, was set apart or made holy for the special service in the Holy Place. Furthermore, within the Levites, one family, the descendants of Aaron, had the superiority. But does this mean that the Levites and the sons of Aaron were morally or spiritually better than anyone else? ... Holiness, sacredness, consecration are not primarily moral categories. While priests were expected to be moral people, that was not what made them holy. It was their being set apart for special service to the Lord (p. 117).

### A. The Establishment of the Aaronic Priests

#### 1. What Makes a Priest a Priest?

##### a) Mediators between God and His people

*Poythress:* The priests of the Old Testament serve as mediators between God and human beings. Because of human sin, people cannot come into the presence of God in His holiness. Instead, the priests represent the people and approach God on behalf of the people. ... The story of Numbers 15-18 confirms that the descendants of Aaron alone are to represent the people. Similarly we find statements about the priests “bearing guilt” on behalf of the people (cp. Ex. 28:30; Lev. 10:17; Num. 18:1, 23). The priests thus present the sins of the people to God for cleansing. They also convey the blessing of God to the people (cp. Num. 6:23-27). In all these respects the priests serve as figures mediating between God and the people. They prefigure a final mediatorial figure who will have no need to offer sacrifices for His own sins, because He is the perfect Mediator (cp. Heb. 7:26-28) (pp. 51-52).

##### b) Different than prophets

- (1) Prophets brought God and His word to the people
- (2) Priests brought the people into the presence of God
- (3) Some priests (e.g., Jeremiah) were also prophets

#### 2. The Earliest Priests

##### a) The term “priest” is first used of Aaron and his sons

##### b) Before, other individuals served as priests by offering sacrifices at sacred places (altars), e.g., Cain, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob

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- c) The head of the family (“patriarch”) functioned as a priest – built altars, offered sacrifices, offered up prayers

*Longman:* Indeed, we observe an analogy between the transition from patriarch-priest to a separate caste of priests and the transition from altars to sanctuaries. It is, specifically, with the establishment of the tabernacle that we see the ordination of a formal priesthood in Israel.... No longer a large family, Israel was now a nation, and so a priesthood needed to be instituted (p. 120).

- d) Priesthood of Israel had similar duties as priests of other, pagan nations
  - (1) Sacrificed animals
  - (2) Maintained the sanctuaries
  - (3) Practiced divination (see Urim and Thummin
  - (4) The difference was not in form, but in content – they worshiped the true God Yahweh
- e) Two non-Israelite priests
  - (1) Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest-king of Salem (cp. Gen. 14:18ff.)
  - (2) Jethro, the Midianite, the father-in-law of Moses (cp. Ex. 3:1)

### 3. The Ordination of Aaron and His Sons

*Longman:* As Israel left Egypt ... the patriarchal system would no longer suffice. In His wisdom, God called a group of men to serve as His priests. They were to be specially consecrated, set apart for work in the Holy Place of the Lord. Their consecration may be called an ordination, a divine commissioning for a crucial and holy task. In particular, it was Aaron, Moses’ brother, and his sons who were chosen for this work (p. 122).

- a) Why was Aaron chosen? – we are not told
  - (1) Moses’ brother, but not given as a reason or qualification
  - (2) Appointed by God as Moses’ spokesman (Ex. 4:16)
- b) When were Aaron and his sons ordained?; the ceremony is described in Leviticus 8-9, but it may not be in chronological order
  - (1) Exodus 19:24 mentions the priests
  - (2) Exodus 29 describes the ordination requirements for priests
  - (3) Exodus 32-34 describes Aaron’s role in the golden calf incident – was he ordained already? If not, wouldn’t this have disqualified him?

### 4. The Ordination Service

*Longman:* The verbs used in Exodus and Leviticus in reference to the initiation of the priests are “purify” (*tahar*), “anoint” (*mashah*), “ordain” (*male’* with *yad*), and “consecrate” (*qadash*). These actions are all combined to lift these individuals ritually out of the realm of the everyday, the common, and transport them into the heavenly or sacred. The phrase for “ordain,” literally “fill the hand,” may refer to payment for the priests, thus showing their full-time devotion to the task, their professional status, so to speak (p. 124).

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### a) Lustration with Water

*Longman:* The first rite was washing with water, symbolizing cleansing as the potential priest moved from the realm of the common and everyday to the sacred precincts of the temple. Thus, it is appropriate that the washing of Aaron and his sons took place at the entrance of the tent (Ex. 29:24).

### b) Investiture with New Clothing

*Longman:* Next, Aaron was given new clothes to wear. This act of investiture again symbolized the priests' entrance into a new realm. They did not wear the clothes they wore in their old world, but put on the new ones that associated them with the tabernacle.... This association is drawn home in that the priestly clothes were similar to the innermost materials of the tabernacle itself. The clothing itself was "sacred," that is, consecrated (*qadash*) according to Exodus 28:2 (pp. 124-125)

*Longman:* The overarching purpose of the description [of the clothing] is to indicate the priests' connection with the tabernacle.... One gets the feeling that the priests were mini-tabernacles, or perhaps better stated, that they were part of the tabernacle structure itself. Thus, at their ordination the priests were invested with the symbols that made them one with the sacred space where they would minister (p. 125).

#### (1) Ephod (Ex. 28:6-14)

- (a) Outer sleeveless garment, attached via shoulder pieces
- (b) Connected to the breastpiece – with the Urim and Thummin (Ex. 28:15-30)
- (c) Made of ornate material consisting of both wool and linen
- (d) Holiness indicated in that this material mixture was forbidden for common use (Lev. 19:19).
- (e) Both the ephod and the breastpiece carried precious stones representing Israel

#### (2) Blue Robe (Ex. 28:31-35)

- (a) Blue/purple dye was extremely expensive – reserved for royalty
- (b) The priest reflected the glory of God the King
- (c) Hem bordered by pomegranates – garden of Eden imagery
- (d) Hem also had golden bells (Ex. 28:35) – the tabernacle was a dangerous place!

#### (3) Other Garments (Ex. 28:36-39)

- (a) High priest had a golden plate with "Holy to the LORD" engraved on it located on his turban (head covering)
- (b) Turban/tunic of fine linen; sash was embroidered

#### (4) Clothing of regular priests (Ex. 28:40-41)

#### (5) Linen undergarments (Ex. 28:42-43)

### c) Anointing with Oil

*Longman:* Anointing was yet a third ritual that lifted the priest out of the realm of the ordinary into sacred space. The anointing was done with oil, and this oil was applied to the priests, their

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clothing, and the tabernacle. The purpose of this ritual was both to confer God’s authority on the priests and to set them off, along with their clothing and the tabernacle complex, as holy. Anointing was not just restricted to priests, but was also used to show God’s choice and to confer authority on kings and prophets as well. Indeed, the verb “anoint” is *mashah* in Hebrew, and “anointed one” is *mashiah*, which forms the basis of the familiar Hebrew word “Messiah” (p. 127).

### d) Sacrifices

*Longman*: A number of sacrifices, not surprisingly, also accompanied the ritual of anointing. It began with a sin offering, thus dealing with the potential cultic profanation that Aaron’s entrance into the sacred precinct of the tabernacle might have caused. Second, there was a whole burnt offering, an *olah*, which also was an atonement offering, but had the resonance of a gift as well. Then finally, the priests were to offer a wave offering ... which was a type of peace offering (*shelamim*, see Lev. 7:28-38). These were the principal offerings, but there were also daily offerings to be sacrificed on each of the seven days of the ritual. The seven days should remind us of the first week, since creation themes run throughout the descriptions of the tabernacle, which itself was a mini-cosmos. While a short statement about the actual ordination of the priests appears in Exodus 40:12-16, the full account of the service is found in Leviticus 8 (p. 128).

*Poythress*: The priests themselves are cleansed in a procedure reminiscent of the cleansing of the tabernacle. The priests must be cleansed by blood. On the day of the consecration of the priests, a sin offering and a whole burnt offering are first presented on their behalf (Lev. 8). They are cleansed from sin and symbolically dedicated wholly to the Lord. Then a special ram is slaughtered. The blood of the ram is placed on their extremities, the lobe of the right ear, the thumb of the right hand, and the big toe of the right foot (Lev. 8:22-23). Since most people are right-handed, the right side is chosen as the principal, representative, “orderly” side. The ear, the upper extremity, is touched first because it is the nearest heaven. Then those extremities are touched that are involved in manipulating the sacrifices and walking on the ground of the tabernacle. Thus the priests’ relations to all the holy things around them are cleansed from defilement (p. 53).

*Poythress*: They are also given garments woven of material similar to the tabernacle material, of gold and blue and scarlet. ... The high priest himself is in fact a kind of vertical replica of the tabernacle. His garments correspond to the curtains of the tabernacle. His headband with the inscription “Holy to the LORD” corresponds to the Most Holy Place, the representation of heaven. His hands manipulate the blood that mediates between heaven and earth. His feet remain planted on the earth. Ears, hands, and feet are all consecrated with blood, corresponding to the consecration of all the parts of the tabernacle. Thus he is not only a human being, sinful like ourselves, but a human being clothed with the majesty of heaven. Majestic as he is, he is not majestic enough. ... The priests die and must be succeeded by others in a process of endless repetition. These priests are really only a shadow and copy of reality, just as the tabernacle itself is a shadow and copy of heaven. The real priest must be heavenly. That is, He must be a man from heaven, true God and true man (Heb. 1:1-5) (pp. 53-54).

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### B. The Rise of the Levites to Priestly Service

*Longman:* The Levites were specially set apart for service to the Lord.... Why were they chosen for this special service? The story is one of the more fascinating in the Old Testament and illustrates some important principles of how God works in the world. But it is often overlooked because it is spread over a number of Old Testament books without explicit reference to each other (p. 131).

1. Birth of Levi (Gen. 29:34) – third child of Leah
2. The Shechem Affair (Gen. 34)
  - a) Hamor, prince of Shechem raped Dinah, the daughter of Leah
  - b) Hamor asked for Dinah’s hand in marriage
  - c) Simeon and Levi revenged their sister by slaughtering all the men of the city
  - d) Jacob was irate (Gen. 34:30)

3. The Blessing of Jacob (Gen. 49)

<sup>5</sup>“**Simeon and Levi are brothers**; weapons of violence are their swords. <sup>6</sup>Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. <sup>7</sup>Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! **I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel** (Genesis 49:5-7).

*Longman:* The effect of Jacob’s curse on Levi and his cohort in crime, Simeon, reverberate throughout the history of Israel.... The effect of that curse is that in the future Simeon and Levi would have no settled existence. Once the descendants of the twelve sons, the twelve tribes, entered Palestine, they would all get parcels of land—with two notable exceptions. When we fast-forward to Joshua 13-22 and read about the allotment of land to the tribes, our expectations are met, and neither Simeon nor Levi receive any land at all (p. 133).

*Longman:* Yet, when we think about it, there is a vast difference between the histories of the tribes of Simeon and Levi. The first was given some cities within the tribal allotment of Judah and then slowly over time disappeared as a separate entity. The Simeonites presumably were absorbed into the tribe of Judah. Levi, on the other hand, became one of the most distinctive and important of the tribes. The Levites were given cities throughout the nation, and far from being absorbed, they were one of the most important and colorful tribes in the history of Israel. What was the difference? In a word, the priesthood (pp. 133-134).

4. Set Apart for the Priesthood (Ex. 32)
  - a) While Moses was on Mt. Sinai, Israel worshiped a golden calf erected by Aaron
  - b) Moses returned, and in his fury broke the tablets of the Ten Commandments on the ground
  - c) The Levites rallied to Moses’ side (Ex. 32:26) and slaughtered 3000 idolaters
  - d) For their service in protecting the holiness of God, they were set apart to be priests (Ex. 32:29)

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*Longman:* The Levites were previously cursed because of their action at Shechem, and in one sense the curse was not overturned. They never received a specific plot of land in the promised territory. However, the curse was transformed into a blessing. They were scattered through the land as a priestly tribe. After all, by their action of killing their brothers and sisters, they showed themselves to be the perfect candidates for the priesthood.... The priests were those who protected the Lord's holiness. They were the bodyguards of God (p. 134).

### C. The Distinctive Live Style of Priests

*Longman:* With great privilege comes great responsibility. Leviticus 21-22 lists the special requirements demanded of the priests. Of course, they were expected to abide by all the other moral and ceremonial requirements imposed upon the rest of the nation. Those two chapters may easily be divided into six sections, each section concluding with words such as "I, the LORD, am holy, and I make you holy).

#### 1. Mourning and Marriage (Lev. 21:1-9)

*Longman:* Priests affirmed life and eschewed death, and so they could not come into contact with dead bodies unless it was a close relative. Furthermore, they could not transform their physical appearance in any way by shaving head or face or by cutting themselves (pp. 135-136).

#### 2. Holiness of the High Priest (Lev. 21:10-15)

- a) He could not even touch the dead body of his close relative
- b) He could not let his hair hang loose
- c) He could not tear his clothes
- d) He could only marry a virgin

#### 3. Without Physical Defect (Lev. 21:16-24)

- a) No permanent defect, e.g., blindness, deafness, lameness, etc.
- b) No temporary defect; e.g., broken bone, scabs, oozing sore
- c) God was concerned about these issues, but did not permit priests with such to officiate at the altar

#### 4. Uncleaness of the Priests (Lev. 22:1-9)

- a) Priests became unclean through touching the dead (cp. Lev. 11:9), having contact with a skin disease (cp. Lev. 13-14), or an emission of semen (cp. Lev. 15:16)
- b) Unclean priests could not eat priestly food until they were ceremonially clean

#### 5. Priestly Food Restrictions (Lev. 22:10-16)

- a) Priestly food could be eaten by close family members (even slaves)
- b) Priestly food could not be eaten by daughters married outside the priestly circle.
- c) Food was a form of payment for their service in the sanctuary

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- d) The priest's dependents needed to be supported through these gifts given to the sanctuary
- 6. Unblemished Sacrifices (Lev. 22:17-30)
  - a) Emphasis on the need for priests to bring only unblemished animals to the altar
  - b) God deserves the best – no defective animals allowed.

### **D. Selection of Questions for Further Reflection**

1. What is ordination? Is ordination of a minister today the same as the ordination of Aaron? Why is ordination necessary?
2. How do the different steps in the ordination ceremony serve to set off the priests?
3. If God overrules evil for good in our lives, should we feel exonerated for the evil we do?

Next Week: Read Longman chapters 13 & 14