

Service of the Levites

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

Overview

Bemidbar 3 and 4 describe several of the tasks assigned to the Levites in the Wilderness, and Bemidbar 8 depicts their purification and consecration to Hashem. When and why were the Levites selected for their elevated position? What does the position entail? How did the Levites' role in the Tabernacle compare to that of the priests? Did their tasks change after arrival in Canaan, with the building of the Mikdash? The page below will survey several approaches to these questions, exploring various aspects of the Levites' service.

Selection for Service

When was the Tribe of Levi designated to assume their special responsibilities and why did they merit them? Is their elevated position a reward for some meritorious deed or were they simply best suited for the tasks required of them? Commentators debate these issues, reaching different conclusion regarding both the timing and reason for the Levite appointment: [See Selection of the Priests and Levites for details.]

- **Before the Exodus** – According to Jubilees, the tribe of Levi was elevated already in the Patriarchal Period, as a reward for Levi's avenging of Dinah in Shekhem. [For elaboration on Jubilees' reading of the Shekhem story, see Sin and Slaughter of Shekhem.]
- **Before the Sin of the Golden Calf** – The tribe was designated at the same time that Aharon was appointed priest, when construction of the Mishkan necessitated their service. R"Y Bekhor Shor posits that the tribe¹ was chosen because Hashem wanted the service to be centralized and confined to a family line rather than be carried out by individual firstborns in every family. This would allow the laws of cultic service to be passed from father to son, facilitating their transmission and ensuring expertise.
- **After the Sin of the Golden Calf** – Rashi, Ibn Ezra and others maintain that the Levites merited their position as a reward for their loyalty to Hashem during the Sin of the Golden Calf.

Age of Service

While Bemidbar 4 sets 30-50 as the age of Levite service, Bemidbar 8:23-26 instead sets 25 as the lower age limit. How can this contradiction be understood? How do both verses work with the fact that in the era of David (Divrei HaYamim I 23:24-28), Chizkiyahu (Divrei HaYamim II 31:17) and Ezra (Ezra 3:8-11), it appears that the Levites began working already at the age of twenty? Commentators resolve the contradiction in one of two ways: [For discussion, see Ages of Levite Workers.]

- **Different levels of obligation** – Sifre Bemidbar asserts that only Levites aged 30 and up were fully obligated to work in the Mishkan. Those aged 25-30 were in training.

- **Different tasks** – Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, in contrast, suggest that there were different tasks assigned to the Levites at different ages. The difficult task of transport was reserved for those 30 and up while other jobs were begun earlier.

Types of Work

What functions were carried out by the Levites in the Tabernacle and Mikdash? Which of these are attested to in Torah and which only in the rest of Tanakh?

Transport and Assembly

Bemidbar 1:50, Bemidbar 3:21-38, and Bemidbar 4 describe how the Levites were tasked with transporting the Tabernacle. The family of Kehat carried the various vessels, Gershon took the curtains, and Merari was in charge of the boards. The Levites were further responsible for the dismantling and erecting of the Mishkan throughout the travels in the Wilderness (see Bemidbar 1:51 and Bemidbar 10:17-21). Some aspects of these roles, though, are under debate:

- **Who carried the ark?** Though Bemidbar 3-4² suggest that it was the Levites' job to carry the ark, other verses (for example, Devarim 31:9, Yehoshua 3-4 and Melakhim I 8:1-6) imply that perhaps this was a task reserved for the priests. Yet other verses³ are ambiguous, mentioning both the priests and Levites. How can the differing portraits be reconciled? Whose job was it to carry the ark?
 - **Levites** – According to R. Yose in Bavli Sotah, the Levites were normally in charge of carrying the ark, but there were a few special occasions (crossing the Jordan, conquering Yericho and placing the ark in the Mikdash) when the priests were given the honor in their stead.⁴
 - **Priests** – Rambam, in contrast, suggests that really the task of transporting the ark was reserved for the priests. It was only in the Wilderness period, due to the small number of priests,⁵ that Levites were allowed to carry it.

Guard Duty

Bemidbar 1:53, 3:7-8, 8:26, and Bemidbar 18:1-5 all speak of the Levites' role in guarding the Tabernacle. Many verses in Ketuvim⁶ speak of the Levites similarly serving as gate-keepers of the Mikdash.⁷

- **Purpose of guarding** – Commentators discuss the goal of this guard duty:
 - **Practical function** – Most commentators assume that the purpose of guarding was practical in nature, to prevent Israelites from approaching too close to the Mishkan.
 - **Honor to the Mikdash** – Ralbag adds that having guards served to elevate the Mikdash in the eyes of the people, for palaces and mansions tend to have people standing guard in front.
- **Placement in camp** – Many commentators directly relate the Levites' placement in the camp closer to the Tabernacle with their task of ensuring that no foreigners approached the Mishkan.⁸ Netziv adds that proximity to the Tabernacle more easily allowed the Levites to care for it. Ralbag, however, suggests that the placement is meant to honor the Levites. The more elevated the tribe, the more honored a position they received around the Tabernacle.

"וְשָׂרְתוּ אֹתוֹ" – Service of the Mishkan / Priests

Bemidbar 1:50 speaks of the Levites serving the Tabernacle ("וְיָהֵם וְשָׂרְתוּ"), while Bemidbar 3:6 and 18:1-3 speak of them serving Aharon ("וְיִשְׂרְתוּ־יָדָי").⁹ What is included in this "service"?

- **Guard duty** – Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Ralbag all explain that the service refers to assisting to guard the Tabernacle (and later Mikdash), lest a foreigner come close. This is

supported by the context, as each of the verses mentioning "שירות" is followed by a variation of the command "וַשְׂמַרְתֶּם אֶת מִשְׁמַרְתְּ הַקֹּדֶשׁ".

- **Song** – Malbim, following R. Yehuda in Bavli Arakhin, understands "service" to refer to singing during the sacrificial service. According to him, the verse is referring to a service that is unique to the Levites, hence singing. This understanding of "service" might be supported by Divrei HaYamim I 6:16-17 which mentions that the Levites "מִשְׁרָתִים לִפְנֵי מִשְׁכַּן אֱלֹהִים מוֹעֵד בְּשִׁיר".
- **Assist in sacrificial service** – R. Yosef Bekhor Shor posits that the service might also include helping the priests with the sacrificial service: slaughtering and skinning, jobs which were allowed to non-priests.¹⁰
- **Assorted jobs** – R. Hirsch explains that the service of the Tabernacle spoken of in Bemidbar 1 is explained by the surrounding verses and refers to the Tabernacle's transportation and assembly.¹¹ "Service of Aharon", in contrast, refers to the various ways in which the Levites assisted the priests - in guard duty,¹² skinning and slaughtering, and acting as treasurers and overseers in the Mikdash.¹³

Judges and Teachers of Torah

In Moshe's blessing to the tribe of Levi, he says, "יִוְרוּ מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לְיַעֲקֹב וְתוֹרָתְךָ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל" (Devarim 33:10), suggesting that the Levites were to be both judges and teachers of Torah. It is not clear, though, if Moshe is speaking of the entire tribe or just of the priests:

- **Priests** – As the continuation of Moshe's blessing speaks of the incense and sacrificial service (שִׁמּוֹ; יְשִׁימוּ), jobs limited to the priests, it is possible that the first half of the verse is addressed only to them as well. In addition, elsewhere in Torah (see, for example, Vayikra 10:11, Devarim 17:9-12, Devarim 19:17, Devarim 21:5),¹⁴ it is specifically the priests who are assigned the tasks of judging and teaching.
- **Entire tribe** – Many commentators,¹⁵ though, assume that Moshe is referring to the entire tribe. Just as the earlier part of Moshe's blessing ("הָאֵמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם וְלְיִצְחָק וְלְיַעֲקֹב לֹא רָאִיתִיו") referred to the entire tribe, so does this half of verse 10. One might bring further proof from Divrei HaYamim II 19:8-11 where Yehoshafat appoints *both* the Levites and priests as judges, or from Nechemyah 8:7-8, where it is the Levites who explain the Torah to the nation: "וְהָלֹאִים מִבְּיָנֵיהֶם אֶת הַעָם לְתוֹרָה".

When and why did the tribe merit this task?

- **Had time to learn** – R"Y Bekhor Shor suggests that since the Levites did not merit an inheritance and did not have to work the land, they had more time to learn Torah than others.
- **Faithful servants** – Sforno asserts that when the Levites proved themselves loyal to Hashem during the Sin of the Golden Calf, they also proved themselves worthy to be teachers and arbiters of the Law.
- **Were always teachers** – According to Rambam, in contrast, Levi was chosen already by Yaakov to learn and teach.¹⁶ Rambam's position has several important ramifications:
 - According to him, the Levites were chosen to be teachers of Torah much before they were chosen for cultic service.¹⁷ Originally, perhaps Hashem had thought to separate the jobs, leaving the cultic service in the hands of the firstborns.
 - It was this prior selection as teachers of Torah which motivated the Levites not to sin with the Calf (and not vice versa).¹⁸ Their role in the incident might have led to Hashem's decision to combine the positions of cultic service and Talmud Torah in one group of people.
 - The Levites did not get an inheritance in the land specifically because they were meant to be judges and teachers of Torah.¹⁹ They, instead, lived throughout Israel, "sitting at the gates," the

place of judgment in the time of Tanakh.

- Moshe was perhaps chosen to be the giver of the Torah since he came from the tribe of Levi, those who had always learned and taught Torah.

"וּלְכַפֵּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל"

Miscellaneous Jobs Not Explicit in Torah

There are several roles played by the Levites in later books of Tanakh which are not mentioned explicitly in Torah:

- **Music** – Though no verses in Torah explicitly mention that the Levites were supposed to function as singers or musicians,²⁰ verses throughout Ketivim attest to this role.²¹
- **Preparation of Bread** – Divrei HaYamim I 9:32 speaks of Kehat being in charge of baking the showbread. It is not clear, though, if this refers to the Levites or priests.
- **Purification of Mikdash** – Divrei HaYamim II 29:15 describes how the Levites played a role in purifying the Mikdash in the era of Chizkiyahu.
- **Officers** - Several verses in Divrei HaYamim²² have the Levites acting as "שטרִים". It is not clear what function these שטרִים served, but from the context of Divrei HaYamim II 19:8-11, it might refer to law enforcement.

Supervisors

Was Elazar or Itamar assigned to supervise the Levites?

¹ He does not explain why it was specifically this tribe as opposed to any other. It is possible that they were selected due to the merits of the family of Moshe and Aharon rather than any specific deeds performed by the tribe as a whole.

² See also Devarim 31:25 and Divrei HaYamim II 35:3.

³ See Yehoshua 8:33, Shemuel II 15:24 and Divrei HaYamim I 15:11-12.

⁴ Ramban points out that since the task of carrying the ark was given to the family of Kehat, of whom the priests are a part, the priests, too, are always allowed to carry the ark. Normally, though, it is the Levites who do so.

⁵ As there were only three priests in the Wilderness period and the ark required four people to carry it, it was impossible for them to carry out the job.

⁶ See, for instance, Ezra 2:42, Ezra 7:7, Nechemyah 7:45, Divrei HaYamim I 9:17-26 and Divrei HaYamim II 23:19 and Divrei HaYamim II 34:13.

⁷ Ramban points to Bemidbar 1:53 as the source for the obligation that the Levites guard the Mikdash as well, pointing to Divrei HaYamim I 24:19 (אֵלֶּה פְּקֻדֹתָם לְעַבְדָתָם לְבוֹא לְבֵית י"י כְּמִשְׁפָּטֵם בְּיַד אַהֲרֹן אֲבִיהֶם) which suggests that David's division of the Levites into groupings of guards was instituted already by Aharon.

⁸ This would seem to be the simple understanding of Bemidbar 1:53, which speaks of both the Levites' encampment around the Tabernacle and the need for guarding the Mikdash, so that Hashem's wrath will not fall on Israel: וְהָיוּ יַחַד סָבִיב לְמִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת וְלֹא יִהְיֶה קֶצֶף עַל עַדְת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְשִׁמְרוּ הַלְוִיִּם אֶת מִשְׁמַרְת מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת

⁹ Bemidbar 8:26 also uses the verb "שרת" but this verse is speaking of the older Levites serving (with) the other Levites in the Tabernacle. This service is contrasted with "working" in the Tabernacle.

¹⁰ As evidence he points to Divrei HaYamim II 30:17 and Divrei HaYamim II 29:34, where the Levites assist the priests in sacrificing and skinning the Pesach sacrifice. See also the commentary attributed to

Rashi who understands Divrei HaYamim I 23:31 to refer to work done by the Levites relating to the sacrificial service (bringing of the animals and skinning them).

¹¹ Netziv suggests that it might refer to repairs as well.

¹² See Bavli Tamid.

¹³ See Sifre Bemidbar 18:2.

¹⁴ See also Yechezkel 44:24 and Malakhi 2:7.

¹⁵ See R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Rambam, Ramban and Sforno.

¹⁶ This, of course, raises the question of what there was to learn centuries before the Torah was given. Did the Avot keep all the mitzvot of Torah? See Avot and Mitzvot – Was Avraham the First Jew?

¹⁷ This matches Rambam's general approach that "service of the heart" is the primary form of service to Hashem and that cultic service is secondary. See Purpose of the Sacrifices for elaboration.

¹⁸ Rambam claims that they were also the only ones who did not turn to idolatry in Egypt. He might also suggest, as does Chikzuni, that they were not included in the enslavement due to their being engaged in Talmud Torah. See Religious Identity in Egypt and Who was Enslaved in Egypt.

¹⁹ This is the exact opposite of R"Y Bekhor shor's opinion.

²⁰ Various verses have been proposed as the source for the Levites' obligation to sing during the sacrificial service, but none is explicit. See the discussion in Bavli Arakhin 11a-b.

²¹ See, for instance, Ezra 3:10, Ezra 7:7, Divrei HaYamim I 6:16-17, Divrei HaYamim I 9:33, Divrei HaYamim I 23:5, Divrei HaYamim II 29:25-28.

²² See Divrei HaYamim I 23:4, Divrei HaYamim II 19:8-11 and Divrei HaYamim II 34:13.

