

Selection of the Priests and Levites

Introduction

Conflicting Verses

Shemot 28 opens with the command to consecrate Aharon and his sons to serve as priests:

(א) וְאַתָּה הַקָּרֵב אֶלְיָךְ אֶת אֶהֱרֹן אָחִיךָ וְאֶת בָּנָיו אֲתוֹ מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכַהֵנוּ לִי אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וְאַבְיָהוּא אֶלְעָזָר וְאִיתָמָר בְּנֵי אֶהֱרֹן.

(1) And bring thou near unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that they may minister unto Me in the priest's office, even Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons.

As these verses come in the midst of the instructions regarding the building of the Tabernacle and its service, but before the story of the Golden Calf, it would appear that the designation of the priests occurred prior to the Sin of the Calf¹ and was unrelated to it. However, after recounting the aftermath of the Golden Calf in Devarim 10, Moshe seems to suggest otherwise:

(א) בַּעַת הַהוּא אָמַר יְיָ אֵלַי פָּסֵל לִךְ שְׁנֵי לִוְחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֻׁנִים וְעֵלָה אֵלַי הַהָרָה וְעָשִׂיתָ לָךְ אֲרוֹן עֵץ...
(ח) בַּעַת הַהוּא הִבְדִּיל יְיָ אֶת שִׁבְט הַלְוִי לְשֵׂאת אֶת אֲרוֹן בְּרִית יְיָ לְעַמֵּד לִפְנֵי יְיָ לְשָׂרְתוֹ וּלְבָרְכָהּ בְּשִׁמּוֹ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

(1) At that time the Lord said unto me: 'Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first, and come up unto Me into the mount; and make thee an ark of wood....
(8) At that time the Lord separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name, unto this day.

Ostensibly, these verses indicate that the tribe of Levi assumed their special responsibilities² only after the Sin of the Golden Calf. How can we reconcile the accounts of Shemot and Devarim? Moreover, is it logical that Aharon, who is castigated by Moshe for his role in the making of the Calf, would receive a special promotion immediately thereafter?

Priests Before the Miskhan?

Further confusing matters, a third verse found in Chapter 2 of the Book of Shemuel may place the selection of the Priests in an even earlier era:



(כז) וַיָּבֹא אִישׁ אֶל-לְהִים אֶל עֲלֵי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר יְיָ הַגְּלָה נִגְלִיתִי אֶל בֵּית אָבִיךָ בְּהִיוֹתְךָ בְּמִצְרַיִם לְבֵית פְּרַעֲהוֹ. (כח) וּבָחַר אֶתְּךָ מִכָּל שְׁבֹטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִי לְכַהֵן לְעֹלוֹת עַל מִזְבְּחִי לְהַקְטִיר קֹטֶרֶת לְשֵׂאת אֶפֻּד לְפָנַי וְאַתָּנָה לְבֵית אָבִיךָ אֶת כָּל אֲשֵׁי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

(27) And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him: 'Thus saith the Lord: Did I reveal Myself unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house? (28) And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be My priest, to go up unto Mine altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before Me? and did I give unto the house of thy father all the offerings of the children of Israel made by fire?

According to these verses (assuming they refer to a single event), Hashem revealed himself to the priestly line and chose them to serve while they were still in Egypt! And, in fact, even before the construction of the Mishkan, the text describes a class of "כֹּהֲנִים" as well as a group who offer sacrifices. Thus, in Shemot 19, before the revelation at Sinai, Hashem warns, "גַּם הַכֹּהֲנִים הַנֹּגְשִׁים אֶל יְיָ יִתְקַדְּשׁוּ", and during the covenantal ceremony in Shemot 24, the Torah states, "וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת נֹעָרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת וַיִּזְבְּחוּ זִבְחִים שְׁלָמִים". Who are these groups and how do they relate to Aharon and his sons? Were the priests chosen prior to the Exodus, before the Sin of the Golden Calf, or in its aftermath?

Priests and Levites

Since the Priests and Levites served in related roles, and were part of the same tribe, it would not be surprising if they might have been designated together. Nonetheless, the text presents the commands to consecrate each group separately, discussing Aharon and sons already in Shemot 28, and the Levites only first in Bemidbar 8. It is noteworthy, however, that the Levites are also alluded to (albeit only in passing) in Shemot 38, in the midst of the Mishkan chapters:

(כא) אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר פָּקַד עַל פִּי מֹשֶׁה עַבְדְּת ה' לְוִיִּם בְּיַד אִיתָמָר בֶּן אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן.

(21) These are the accounts of the tabernacle, even the tabernacle of the testimony, as they were rendered according to the commandment of Moses, through the service of the Levites, by the hand of Itamar, the son of Aaron the priest.

Did the Priests and Levites merit their elevated positions for the same reason or was Aharon's designation due to factors unrelated to those of the broader tribal appointment? Did they take place at the same or different times?

Replacement of Firstborns

The selection of the tribe of Levi is integrally connected to the rejection of the firstborns:

(יב) וַאֲנִי הִנֵּה לְקַחְתִּי אֶת הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תַּחַת כָּל בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם. (יג) כִּי לִי כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הַקְּדַשְׁתִּי לִי כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאָדָם עַד בְּהֵמָה לִי יְהִיוּ אֲנִי יְיָ.

(12) “Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn who open the womb among the children of Israel; and the Levites shall be mine: (13) for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I made holy to me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and animal. They shall be mine. I am Hashem.”

Though the firstborns had been consecrated after the Plague of the Firstborns, they were replaced by the Levites. These verses raise several questions:

- What role was originally played by the firstborns? Were they the original Priests, Levites, or neither?
- Was their replacement by the Levites due to a sin on the part of the firstborns, or a meritorious deed of the Levites? Alternatively, was the decision a practical one unrelated to the worthiness of either group?

¹ This assumes that the commandment to build the Mishkan preceded the Sin of the Golden Calf, like the straightforward reading of Sefer Shemot. However, there are dissenting opinions. For more, see Purpose of the Mishkan.

² The verse also appears to be referring to the Kohanim (and not merely the other Levites). While the carrying of the Ark might have been performed by the regular Levites, the blessing of the nation is a uniquely priestly role.

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Exegetical Approaches

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

Overview

In trying to determine when the Tribe of Levi was designated to become Priests and Levites, commentators must contend with conflicting verses, the relationship between the election of the two groups, and the connection between both and the original sanctification of the firstborn sons. On one end of the spectrum, Jubilees posits that already in the Patriarchal period Yaakov elevated Levi above the other tribes, promising his descendants both positions. As such, it is possible that the firstborns might have never played any cultic role at all. Rashi, in contrast, based on the verses in Devarim, delays the election of both Priests and Levites to the aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf. According to him, the firstborns had originally played a priestly role, and they were replaced only in the aftermath of their sinning with the Golden Calf.

A middle position focuses on the description of the choosing of Aharon in Shemot 28, setting his selection prior to the story of the Calf. In anticipation of the construction of the Mishkan, Hashem decided to centralize the various responsibilities which had originally been delegated to the firstborns and consolidate them in one specific tribe. Ramban, in contrast, distinguishes between the appointments of Aharon who was chosen before his negative role in the episode of the Calf, and the rest of the tribe of Levi who were first appointed after and as a result of their role in atoning for the sin of the Calf.

Before the Exodus

The tribe of Levi was singled out to be Levites and Priests already in Egypt, and was perhaps chosen even as early as the Patriarchal Period.

SOURCES: Jubilees, Testament of Levi,¹ Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan),² Tanchuma,³ Shemot Rabbah, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, R. Yosef Kimchi

Why Levi?

- **Actions in Shekhem** – According to most of these sources,⁴ it was Yaakov who sanctified the tribe of Levi to serve Hashem. Jubilees maintains that this was a reward for Levi's⁵ avenging of Dinah's honor in Shekhem.⁶
- **Moshe's family** – Shemot Rabbah and R"Y Kimchi, in contrast, suggest that the appointment occurred first in Egypt, with Shemot Rabbah implying that it was the elevated character of specifically Moshe's family that merited the positions.⁷ The Midrash suggests that Moshe himself was originally destined for the priesthood, while Aharon was to be a Levite, but after Moshe's repeated refusals of Hashem's mission at the burning bush, Hashem punished him by switching the roles.

"הַנְּגִלָה נְגִלְתִּי אֶל בֵּית אַבְרָם... לִי לְכֹהֵן" – According to R. Yosef Kimchi, this verse in Shemuel supports the case for a pre-Exodus appointment, since it implies that, already in Egypt, Hashem revealed Himself to the House

of Levi and chose them to serve him as priests.⁸ Shemot Rabbah adds that the tribe had special status in Egypt, not sharing in the bondage of the rest of the nation.⁹ [See Who was Enslaved in Egypt for elaboration.]

"בַּעַת הַהוּא הִבְדִּיל י"י אֶת שִׁבְט הַלְוִי" – This verse is difficult for this approach, as it implies that the tribe was first chosen after the Sin of the Golden Calf.¹⁰ These sources might suggest that though Levi had been singled out much earlier, it was only with the finished construction of the Mishkan, after the sin, that their selection became official, with a permanent and regulated character. Thus, it was only then that the tribe actively assumed its elevated role, with its daily acts of service.

The "כֹּהֲנִים" of Shemot 19 – This position could suggest that the word Kohanim here refers to the same people as it does in the rest of Tanakh: Aharon's sons who have already been appointed.¹¹ This might be supported by the similar cast of characters that are mentioned both in this verse (Moshe, Aharon, the Kohanim, and the nation) and in the parallel verse of Shemot 24 (Moshe, Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and the Elders representing the nation).¹²

Sacrifices before the Mishkan – These sources might maintain that the "נֹעֲרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" who bring offerings at Sinai in Shemot 24 are also Aharon's sons. It is not clear, however, why they would be referred to in this manner rather than by either their names or title.¹³ According to Jubilees, it is possible that all sacrificial worship already from Patriarchal times was performed by members of the tribe of Levi.

Levites and the Golden Calf – According to this position, it is possible that it was specifically the Levites, who had already been designated to serve God, who heeded Moshe's call to act against the Calf's idolators. In other words, the Levites' selection was the impetus for their taking action rather than a consequence of it.

"מִלְאוּ יְדְכֶם הַיּוֹם לִי... לַתּוֹת עֲלֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרִכָּה" – These sources might explain, as does R. Saadia Gaon, that the words "מִלְאוּ יְדְכֶם הַיּוֹם לִי" constitute Moshe's congratulations to the Levites on their work, but do not connote an induction into service of Hashem. Though the Levites did receive a blessing and reward for their actions, this was not an elevation in status (which had already previously occurred), but rather a general blessing of good.

Status of the firstborns – This approach might maintain that the firstborns never held any Levite or priestly status. They were sanctified in Egypt because they had been saved from the Plague of the Firstborn,¹⁴ but this was not accompanied by any ritual role.¹⁵

Switching of Levites and firstborns – If the firstborns never played a role in Divine worship, it is not clear what it means that the Levites were chosen to serve in their stead. These sources might explain that the redemption of Bemidbar 3 does not imply a substitution of service, but simply a redemption of the firstborns' holy status.



Before the Sin of the Golden Calf

The Priests were designated before the Sin of the Golden Calf, in preparation for the construction of the Mishkan. This positions subdivides regarding the timing of the selection of the Levites:

Levites with Priests

The Priests and Levites were chosen at the same time.

SOURCES: Possibly Ralbag,¹⁶

Why Levi? Ralbag¹⁷ highlights the importance of choosing a tribe (rather than individuals) to serve Hashem,¹⁸ and suggests that specifically the Levites were chosen due to the worthiness of the tribe as a whole and the merits of Aharon's family in particular. They were closer to perfection and capable of apprehending Hashem more than others.

Status of the firstborns – This position maintains that before there was centralized ritual worship in the Mishkan, it was the firstborns who performed the tasks later assumed by the Priests and Levites.

Switching of Levites and firstborns

- **Practical purpose** – According to this approach, the switch was prompted by neither a need to reward the tribe of Levi nor a desire to punish the firstborns. It was rather a practical decision. R"Y Bekhor Shor explains that that Hashem wanted the service to be confined to a family line so that the laws could be passed from father to son, facilitating their transmission and ensuring expertise.¹⁹ Moreover, since the firstborns were due to receive a double portion in the land, they would have been too preoccupied to devote themselves entirely to the service of Hashem.²⁰
- **Sin and corrective** – It is also possible that the firstborns were rejected due to a sin which preceded the Golden Calf. If one posits that the "אֶצִּילִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" who "saw God" during the covenantal ceremony of Shemot 24 were the firstborns,²¹ then it is possible that they were disqualified for overstepping their bounds.²² The Levites were chosen instead, with one of their main functions being to guard the Sanctuary so that unauthorized persons did not approach.

Chronology of the command to build the Mishkan – This approach is supported by the simple order of the verses, according to which Aharon is commanded regarding his role as the Kohen before the Sin of the Golden Calf.²³ Though the Levites are not mentioned there, it is logical that they might have been chosen at the same time since it was the establishment of the Tabernacle that prompted a need for their service.²⁴

Levites and the Golden Calf – R"Y Bekhor Shor asserts that the Levites were not the only ones who answered Moshe's call to kill the worshipers of the Calf, and there were many people from the rest of the nation who joined as well.²⁵ If so, the Levites' actions during the incident might not have been so unique to merit them the reward of elevated status.

"מלאו ידכם היום לי"י... לתת עליכם היום ברכה" – R"Y Bekhor Shor explains that the blessing spoken of here is unrelated to the tribe's appointment as Levites and Priests.²⁶ He asserts, instead, that it refers to their being included in the blessings of Moshe before his death. Though they had not received a blessing from Yaakov, this action warranted them one from Moshe.

The "כֹּהֲנִים" of Shemot 19 – This position might suggest that these were the firstborns, since at this point, before the command to build the Mishkan, they, rather than members of the tribe of Levi, had the status of priests.²⁷

"וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת נֹעָרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת" – It is possible that the "נֹעָרִים" who sacrificed were also the firstborns who were still functioning in a priestly role at this point in the narrative.

"בָּעֵת הַהוּא הִבְדִּיל י"י אֶת שִׁבְט הַלְוִי" – Though Hashem had chosen the tribe of Levi without any connection to their role during Sin of the Calf, practically, the Tabernacle was built after the sin, and thus "it was at that time" that the tribe was actively separated.

"הַנְּגִלָה נִגְלִיתִי אֶל בֵּית אַבְיָה... לִי לָכֵהֶן" – Ralbag explains that these verses speak of two distinct events which transpired at separate times. While Hashem's revelation to Aharon's family occurred already in Egypt, their selection as priests took place only much later.



Levites Only Later

The choosing of the Levites was distinct from the sanctification of the Priests. While the Priests were selected already before the Sin of the Golden Calf, the Levites were chosen only afterwards.

SOURCES: Ramban, Abarbanel

Chronology of the command to build the Mishkan – This approach works with the simple chronology of the verses which presents Aharon's designation as part of the commands regarding the Mishkan given prior to the Sin of the Golden Calf, but speaks of the consecration of the rest of the Levites only in the second year, long after the story of the Calf.²⁸

Why were Aharon and the Levites chosen? Abarbanel asserts that Aharon merited the priesthood because, with the exception of Moshe, no one else in Israel came close to his level of perfection and prophecy. The Levites, in contrast, were chosen due to the fact that they did not participate in the Sin of the Golden Calf, but rather defended the honor of Hashem.²⁹ Thus, the two appointments were totally distinct and for completely different reasons.

Status of the firstborns – Ramban³⁰ suggests that, until the Tabernacle was built, every individual was allowed to sacrifice, and the firstborns did not have any unique priestly status. Nonetheless, he appears to maintain that after they were sanctified during the Plague of the Firstborn, they did assume Levite status.³¹ It is unclear, however, what that would entail before the Tabernacle was built, when there was nothing to carry or guard.³²

Sin of the Golden Calf and replacing of the firstborns – Abarbanel asserts that the firstborns were rejected for having sinned with the Golden Calf, while the Levites, who did not sin, replaced them.

"מִלֹּאֵי יָדְכֶם הַיּוֹם לִי... לְתֵת עֲלֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרֹכָה" – This position could suggest, like Rashi below, that these words describe the dedication of the Levites to Hashem and their being blessing with exalted status.

"בָּעֵת הַהוּא הִבְדִּיל י"י אֶת שִׁבְט הַלְוִי" – This verse would appear to pose a difficulty, as it seems to suggest that both the Priests and Levites³³ were chosen in the aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf. Ramban responds

that the phrase "בַּעַת הַהוּא" refers not to the events of the Calf, but rather to the later period when Moshe attained atonement for both Aharon and the nation. As such, Moshe is saying that, "at that [later] time", Hashem needed to reaffirm his choice of Aharon as Kohen, as it had been temporarily nullified due to the sin.³⁴

The "כֹּהֲנִים" of Shemot 19 – Abarbanel posits that these could refer either to the firstborns who were still sanctified or to Nadav and Avihu who are so called after their future position.

"וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת נְעָרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת" – Ramban maintains that these נְעָרִים refer to virgin youths, who because of their ritual purity were chosen to bring these sacrifices. This is consistent with his opinion that before the Tabernacle's construction, all were allowed to offer private sacrifices.

"הַנְּגִלָה נְגִלְתִּי אֶל בֵּית אַבְיָה... לִי לְכֹהֵן" – This approach could explain like the previous approach that these verses combine two distinct events which occurred at separate times. Prophecy was given to Aharon's family already in Egypt, but their selection as Kohanim took place only much later.

Rebellion of Korach – Though Ramban dates the rebellion to after the story of the Spies, he nonetheless connects it to the selection of Aharon as priest,³⁵ viewing it as the cause of some of the nation's complaints.³⁶ Korach and the 250 men were upset that, with Aharon's appointment, laypeople could no longer bring sacrifices and only Aharon could.³⁷



In the Aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf

After the nation sinned at the Golden Calf, the tribe of Levi was picked for both the priesthood and Levite positions.

SOURCES: Philo, Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Sforno, Keli Yekar, Hoil Moshe

Chronology of the command to build the Mishkan – These sources all maintain that the command to build the Tabernacle was given only after the incident of the Golden Calf and that the verses are achronological.³⁸ This allows them to assert that even though the appointment of Aharon is spoken of earlier, it occurred only after the sin, together with the consecration of the Levites.

"בַּעַת הַהוּא הַבְּדִיל י"י אֶת שִׁבְט הַלְוִי" – This verse supports this approach as it describes the choosing of the tribe of Levi for both Levite and Priestly functions and dates both to the aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf.

Why were Aharon and the Levites chosen? These sources can easily explain that the Levites merited the position as a reward for their loyalty to Hashem during the sin of the Golden Calf. However, it is much harder to understand why Aharon is chosen in the aftermath of the incident, considering that his actions there were not meritorious but rather blameworthy:

- According to Rashi, the entire purpose of the Mishkan was to provide proof that Hashem had indeed forgiven their deed.³⁹ If so, perhaps choosing Aharon as priest was the ultimate sign of forgiveness.
- Sforno and Hoil Moshe assert that prior to the sin, the worship of Hashem was intended to be via private altars and individual service. However, the sin proved that the nation needed intermediaries in the form

of a Tabernacle and priests. As such, Aharon might have been chosen to serve as a corrective for both his and the nation's deeds.

- Alternatively, this approach might posit that the appointment of Aharon itself proves that he actually did not sin egregiously during the episode of the Golden Calf. Though his actions might have led others to sin, his intentions were pure and he himself never worshiped the Calf and thus was truly worthy of the priesthood.

Status of the firstborns – According to these sources, prior to their rejection, the firstborns had priestly status and were in charge of bringing sacrifices. According to Rashi, they had this status already in the Patriarchal period.⁴⁰ The other sources might suggest that it was only attained after their sanctification in the aftermath of the Plague of the Firstborn.

Sin of the Golden Calf and replacing of the firstborns – These sources all suggest that the firstborns were rejected due to their worship of the Golden Calf. Ibn Ezra asserts that, in their role as priests, it was specifically the firstborns who sacrificed before the Calf, making them the most guilty.

"מלאו ידכם היום לי"י... לתת עליכם היום ברכה" – These sources all understand this statement to refer to the meriting of elevated status, but they differ regarding the details:

- Rashi understands the phrase "מלאו ידכם" to refer to a dedication, and that Moshe told the Levites that in return for their deed they would be dedicated to Hashem.
- Sforno instead explains that the phrase refers to attaining perfection (מלא=שלם) so that the tribe would be prepared to serve Hashem.

The "כֹּהֲנִים" of Shemot 19 – Since Aharon was not yet appointed at this stage, Rashi and Ibn Ezra assert that the term refers to the firstborns.⁴¹

"וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת נְעָרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת" – Ibn Ezra and Hoil Moshe maintain that this group, too, refers to the firstborns who still had sacrificial duties. Ibn Ezra posits that they are referred to as "נְעָרִים" in contrast to the Elders, who were also firstborns, but had less strength to bring the offerings.

Rebellion of Korach – Ibn Ezra asserts that the rebellion was a direct result of the selection, dating it to the beginning of the second year, after the Levites were chosen but before their consecration. He opines that the rebels were composed of different factions, one of which was the firstborns who were upset about losing their priestly status, and another of which was the Levites themselves who were upset about having to serve Aharon. See Korach's Rebellion for elaboration.

¹ Testament of Levi speaks only of the choosing of the priesthood.

² Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) speaks of the choosing of the Tribe of Levi in general terms. It does not specify if it refers to their meriting the priesthood, Levite service or both.

³ From the Tanchuma, is also unclear whether it is referring to the priesthood, Levite service or both.

⁴ See Jubilees, Testament of Levi, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), and Tanchuma. With the exception of Jubilees, however, none of the sources explain why Levi, as opposed to the other tribes, was chosen.

⁵ One might question why they were more worthy than the tribe of Shimon who acted similarly. It is possible that Shimon's later marriage to a Canaanite (and his future tribal prince's relations with the Midianite Kozbi) served to disqualify him. For Jubilees, it was not the rape of Dinah itself which was so problematic, but the

potential marriage to a non-Jew. Thus, through Shimon's intermarriage, he undid any merit he might have gained by trying to prevent Dinah's marriage to Shekhem. For elaboration on Jubilees' read of the Shekhem story, see Sin and Slaughter of Shekhem.

⁶ The sources below who say that the tribe of Levi merited the position after their actions during the episode of the Golden Calf might be picking up on the same trait of zeal for Hashem.

⁷ Shemot Rabbah is ambiguous and could also suggest that the tribe as a whole was picked earlier and only the specific allotment of Levite status to Moshe and priesthood to Aharon occurred in Egypt.

⁸ According to R"Y Kimchi, verses 27 and 28 are connected; the revelation spoken of in verse 27 is the choosing of the tribe spoken of in verse 29.

⁹ See Shemot 4:27 that Aharon has the freedom to leave Egypt and greet Moshe in the Wilderness.

¹⁰ The time spoken of in the previous verses relates to the period in which Moshe received the second set of Tablets.

¹¹ Cf. the opinion of R. Yehuda HaNasi in Bavli Zevachim.

¹² Cf. the Hoil Moshe who identifies the commands of the two verses, suggesting that "Nadav and Avihu" in Shemot 24:1 are the equivalent of the "Kohanim" of Shemot 19:24.

¹³ It is possible that the term is used in contrast to the Elders, mentioned earlier. See Rashi who alternatively suggests that the youths were fetched to bring the animals but they are not the subject of the phrase, "וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת". Only Aharon's sons actually sacrificed.

¹⁴ This was not something they individually merited, but simply a consequence of being saved; with the miraculous act they became holy to Hashem.

¹⁵ It is even possible that those sanctified were just the children born after the Plague, in which case it is obvious that these infants could not have been in charge of sacrificing.

¹⁶ Ralbag is not totally explicit and some of his comments seem inconsistent. In his comments to Shemot 28, he explains the choice of the tribe of Levi as being related to the worthiness of the tribe "from birth", singling out Aharon's family in particular, and disconnecting the selection from the story of the sin of the Golden Calf. However, in his defense of Aharon's role in the sin (see Ralbag on Shemot 32), Ralbag raises the possibility that Aharon might have first been given his position in the aftermath of the sin, going so far as to say that he was "rewarded for his efforts" to stop the debacle. It is possible, though, that what Ralbag means is that despite the fact that one might have thought that Aharon should have lost the priesthood, he was still rewarded and allowed to keep it since his intentions throughout the episode were pure.

See also R. Yosef Bekhor Shor on Bemidbar 3:13. The lone surviving manuscript of the commentary (Munich 52) reads: "ונראה שלפי אותו מעשה הבדלו" (the "מעשה" being the sin of the Golden Calf.) As the text reads somewhat awkwardly, Gad has proposed the emendation of "ונראה שלפ[ני] אותו מעשה הבדלו". According to his rendering, R"Y Bekhor Shor, too, raises the possibility that the Levites were chosen before the sin. It should be noted, however, that the prooftext that R"Y Bekhor Shor brings immediately after this line (Yechezkel 44:15) supports the idea that the tribe was rewarded for its loyalty when others strayed, suggesting that he is referring to their role during the sin. Moreover, he brings the same exact prooftext in his comments to Devarim 10:8 where he explicitly writes, "וכשעמדו בנאמנותם בני לוי בעגל, זכו לאותה בחירה".

¹⁷ See also R. Yosef Bekhor Shor discussed below.

¹⁸ See the elaboration in the points below.

¹⁹ If the firstborns were to play the role of priests, they would be much more likely to err as they would not be accustomed to the service and would not necessarily have a parent to ingrain in them the complexities of the

service.

²⁰ R"Y Bekhor Shor and Ralbag explain that this is also the reason why the tribe of Levi did not get an inheritance at all. This freed them for devotion to God. Ralbag adds that it gave them the time to work on attaining the perfection needed to properly apprehend God.

²¹ R"Y Bekhor Shor identifies them as the same people.

²² See Revelation to the Elders at Sinai for discussion.

²³ See, though, the discussion below and Purpose of the Mishkan that many disagree and suggest that, despite the simple reading of the verses, the commands regarding the Mishkan were first issued in the aftermath of the sin.

²⁴ For further discussion, see Chronology of Bemidbar 1 – 10.

²⁵ The verse highlights that "וַיִּאָסְפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל בְּנֵי לֵוִי" only because they were unique in that the entire tribe had not worshiped the Calf.

²⁶ Despite this reading of the verse, he himself does appear to think that the Levites were rewarded with cultic service for the role they played in the episode of the Calf.

²⁷ Cf. Ibn Ezra below who suggests that they are parallel to the "Elders" of Shemot 24:1 who also refer to the firstborns. As such, Ibn Ezra maintains that both verses speak of the same event with the same cast of characters.

²⁸ Ramban is consistent in understanding that the Torah is written chronologically. For more on his approach, see R. Moshe b. Nachman.

²⁹ Ramban suggests that the Levites were not chosen immediately after their actions during the episode of the Golden Calf, but later in the second year when they were consecrated. This leaves open the possibility that their appointment was unrelated to the episode, and might have been due only to their connection to Moshe and Aharon. Alternatively, already during the episode of the Calf, Hashem decided to appoint the Levites but simply did not put His decision into effect until later.

³⁰ Ramban also brings the opinion of Chazal that the firstborns were in charge of sacrificing, but he then gives his own alternative "according to the simple sense."

³¹ See, for example, his comments on Bemidbar 17:6, that the nation was upset during the rebellion of Korach because they wanted the firstborns to serve instead of the Levites: "אבל היו חפצים שיהיו הבכורות משרתי". Abarbanel seems to agree as he emphasizes how the Levites took on the role of the firstborns, suggesting that originally the firstborns served in the same Levite capacity.

³² It is possible that the sanctification was only for the future, with the original intention being that they would serve as Levites in the Mishkan, but until its construction they did not have an active role.

³³ The verse speaks specifically of being chosen to carry the Ark (which is the subject of debate as to whether it was a function of the Levites or Priests), and blessing the nation, a task which all assume was performed by the Priests.

³⁴ Ramban is also bothered by the fact that the verse suggests that the Levites were chosen soon after the sin, even though they are only consecrated in the second year. He offers two possibilities to deal with the problem. His first reading suggests that the verse might be saying that with the atonement, Hashem reaffirmed Aharon's position, and simultaneously chose the Levites, though He did not act upon this decision until the second year. Alternatively, the verse might be speaking only of the reaffirmation of Aharon's position, and not of the choosing of the Levites at all. According to this, when the verse says that Hashem "separated the Tribe of Levi" it means that Hashem separated Aharon from the tribe of Levi. In addition, the

mention of the task carrying the Ark is understood according to the position that this be one of the priestly tasks..

³⁵ Ramban posits that at the time of the selection, no one dared to question Moshe, but after the decree of wandering, there was much more dissent in the nation and Korach was able to garner support for his cause.

³⁶ Ramban posits that there were several factions, each upset about a different issue. Thus, while Korach was upset about the designation of Aharon, Datan and Aviram complained instead about Moshe's leadership.

³⁷ This is consistent with his understanding that before Aharon was chosen, the firstborns did not have unique priestly status, but that everyone could sacrifice.

³⁸ For elaboration, see Purpose of the Mishkan.

³⁹ For discussion of Rashi and various alternatives, see Purpose of the Mishkan.

⁴⁰ Thus, Rashi understands that Yaakov's desire for the birthright related to attaining this priestly status (and keeping it from the unworthy Esav.) For elaboration, see Sale of the Birthright – A Fair Deal?

⁴¹ Ibn Ezra posits that the verse is similar to the parallel one in Shemot 24:1, as the elders mentioned there were firstborns as well.