

Chapter 8: *The Levitical Covenant*

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8.1. Introduction

Nehemiah 13:29

Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

The Levitical Covenant is a very unique covenant. It is certainly one of the lesser-known covenants and more often glossed over or even not recognised by theologians. The main covenants of the Bible are the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic or Old Covenant and the New Covenant. These still affect our lives, in one way or another, on a more or less daily basis. The Levitical Covenant however does not. For this reason, among others, the Levitical Covenant is often glossed over. As there is no temple in Jerusalem today many of the functions of the Levites have been usurped. This also has been a contributing factor to why people tend to gloss over the Levitical Covenant. Nevertheless it still has certain lessons to teach today, and it has special lessons for New Covenant believers.

The Levitical Covenant establishes a very special relationship between God and the tribe of the Levites. It gives them a very special privilege, and a special calling. The Levites are called to be God's priests, or at least priestly and ecclesiastical if not priests themselves – particularly to the nation of Israel, and live in service to the temple or tabernacle. They are the functionaries of the Public Ceremonial Law. They are a clan given to holiness. The Levitical Covenant seems to fall wholly under the Mosaic Covenant and to a certain degree acts as an extension of it.

Studying the Levitical covenant however remains relevant even to non-Levites and non-Jews, especially Christians. Under the New Covenant Peter calls Christians, a "royal priesthood." We retain certain priestly functions, such as intercession and teaching. As such there is much that we can learn from the Levites. We retain a priestly privilege namely that we are able to access God directly without the need for an intermediary. We like the Levites are vested with an inherent formal holiness. Like the Levites and *kohen* or priests of old, we are invested with inherent trust and duty of faithfulness and care. And like the Levites, *the Lord himself is our portion*.

We are however under the priesthood of Melchizedek, and our priesthood is not just to intercede for Israel, but indeed the whole world. Like the order of Levi however we

are called to live on a very high experience of practical holiness, and that is something about which the Levitical Covenant can also teach us. The Levitical covenant has much to teach us of the trust invested to us by virtue of the New Covenant and by virtue of the holiness of which we have been made part.

8.2. Value

The Mosaic Covenant has a particular co-party, namely all of Israel. God however wanted a very special and particular relationship with the Levites. God wanted them to be his priests and ministers to Israel. He would in many respects have a vicarious relationship with the nation of Israel through them. As such the Levites would in a sense be his *vicars* (from vicarious) to Israel. God therefore had the Mosaic Covenant with all of Israel and the Levitical Covenant with the Levites. There were two distinct relationships. The Mosaic Covenant – containing the latter four books of the Torah anticipates the Levitical Covenant, or at very least, a priestly order.

To study the Levitical Covenant we ironically cannot turn to Leviticus. Whilst Leviticus does deal with the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Covenant, it does not do so exclusively. In fact I believe we quite wrongly refer to Leviticus as a Levitical book. The Ceremonial Law of Moses under Leviticus is for all of Israel, although perhaps mediated through the Levites. And of course the commandment to ‘love thy neighbour as yourself’ does not come from Exodus but from Leviticus. Leviticus does not address ceremonial law exclusively. Leviticus also does not address the Levitical Covenant at all. Exodus and Deuteronomy address the Mosaic Covenant, and their audience is ‘the children of Israel’. And whilst the Mosaic Covenant addresses the Levites, it does not address their covenant.

To study the Levitical Covenant we need to turn to the book of Numbers – the book of wanderings –. Throughout Numbers God’s special relationship with the Levites is emphasised, and explained in different ways. God gives his priesthood to the Levites, and establishes their priesthood to Israel on that basis.

The whole of Numbers addresses the Levitical Covenant. Whilst the covenant is only confirmed in Numbers 25, it is already recognised in Numbers 18:19 as a so-called, “covenant of salt.” The aspects of the covenant are therefore scattered throughout the book. (We had encountered the same dispersion of elements in the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant.)

The Mosaic Covenant in Exodus does not provide explicitly for a Levitical holy clan. It does refer to a priesthood without explaining it overly much. It does refer to “Aaron and his sons” as being the candidates for the priesthood. It however does not address any lay-preachers or lay holy class from the clan of Levi. In is however in Numbers 3 that God chooses the Levites as holy as to the sons of Abraham in substitution of the firstborn of Israel. The Levites are then re-dedicated in Numbers 8 and then again in Numbers 18.

God confirms this explicitly in covenant with the Levites, after Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, kills an unnamed man who had dared provoke God by taking a Moabite woman into the camp of the Israelites, within the sight of the tent of meeting. (Numbers 25) It is quite extraordinary to see that God treats this holy jealousy as something which would make him qualify Phineas as a priest. (Particularly when his chosen and anointed David himself is a descendant of Ruth, a Moabitess.) Sometimes intercession is to judge people harshly.

Much like Abraham who was first called by God, and then later when he had responded to God’s call, God confirmed his promises in covenant, so also God first charged the Levites to be holy unto him, and then he created a relationship of priesthood with himself.

As with all covenants, the Levitical Covenant creates a special relationship. In particular it creates a very particular relationship between the Levites and God. The Levitical covenant confirms the Levite consecration, and it creates a relationship between God and the Levites as of *priesthood*. The Levites became formalised mediators. In Malachi 2 we read of the character of the role of this mediatory role: they were to have peace, justice and equity on their lips.

The Levitical covenant exists in an eerie parallel to the Davidic Covenant. The Levitical and Davidic Covenants build on the Mosaic Law: the Levitical Law in priesthood, the Davidic in kingship. The Mosaic Law in a sense anticipates both without requiring either. The Levitical Law is however unconditional, whereas the Davidic is conditional. There may be a lesson in this. Spiritual authority is contingent on obedience, whereas priestly intercession is contingent on grace. For us to have authority in God, we have to walk in obedience. For us to draw near to God, for ourselves or others, we can do so by grace alone.

In this the Levitical Covenant is completely unique. All the covenants in one way or another build upon one another. Despite this fact, the divine covenants retain a measure of relative autonomy and independence. Even the Davidic Covenant can exist independent from the Mosaic Covenant, should it be forced to do so. The Levitical Covenant cannot. It is completely and utterly dependant on the Mosaic Covenant, and as such is the only truly and utterly dependant covenant.

8.3. Elements

8.3.1. Words

Numbers 3:12-13

"Now behold I have taken the Levites from all the sons of Israel instead of every firstborn, the first issue of the womb among the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall be mine. For all the firstborn are mine, on the day that I struck down the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified myself all the firstborn in Israel, from man to beast. They shall be mine; I am the Lord."

Numbers 25:10-13

"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Phineas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest has turned away my wrath from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel with my jealousy.

Therefore say, "Behold I give him my covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel."

Psalm 106:30

"Then Phineas stood up and interposed, and so the plague was stayed. And it was reckoned to him for righteousness for all generations forever."

The only recorded words of the covenant are very brief. It explains the covenant to be a covenant of peace, a covenant of priesthood and be a result of Phineas' godly and holy jealousy and atonement. The Levitical Covenant is an *unconditional*

covenant. It has no 'if you then I' provisions. It requires not performance. God makes the Levites his priests – directly and unconditionally.

The words of the Levitical Covenant are scattered throughout the book of Numbers. Numbers 25 establishes the covenant, but it is already recognised in Numbers 18. The unusual nature of the covenant provokes a simple question with difficult answers. *Is the Levitical Covenant a separate covenant from the Mosaic Covenant, or is it a sub-covenant to the Mosaic Covenant?*

If one approaches the Levitical Covenant as a kind of 'sub-covenant', then it requires no particular separate elements, other than words. If however it is a separate covenant, then it does require its unique elements. This question will be addressed in greater depth later. The elements of the Levitical Covenant will be discussed as though it does form a separate covenant. The Mosaic Law however does give the Levitical Covenant a unique flavour. We are faced with a covenant and a concordant relationship that is formal, symbolic, tribal, national, cultural, ritual and in this sense also temporal.

The essential consequences of the covenant are however simple: it creates a relationship of peace, and it creates a particular priesthood tied to a particular tribe, serving within the context of a particular over-arching covenant, namely the Mosaic Covenant.

We may well ask of ourselves, "Why would God go to the extreme and to the effort of creating a whole covenant for one small group of people? Why is there a Levitical Covenant?" I think the answer in this is to be found in how holy God is and how holy a people he needed to have draw near to him be. If one had to draw near to God based on the Law of Moses none of us would be worthy or qualified. But as the Levitical Covenant does not come with all kinds of conditions, the Levites would be divinely authorised and given grace to draw near to him.

8.3.2. The Blood / Offering

The book of Numbers provides for a very particular offering to be made for the Levites. In Numbers 8:8-14 a young bull is offered as wave offering for the atonement of the Levites. Whilst this is not brought directly into terms as 'covenant', it nonetheless fulfils the requirement of being a particular offering to a particular audience for a particular relationship and acts as the most likely candidate for the blood of the Levitical covenant.

8.3.3. The Seal / Sign

The book of Numbers mentions various 'signs' are mentioned with respect to the Levites, once again without explicit reference to covenant, such as Korah's censers in Numbers 16. Any one of them could ostensibly be the seal of the covenant.

The most likely candidate as official sign or seal for the Levitical Covenant we find in Numbers 17 where the leaders of Israel set their staffs in God's presence. God honoured Aaron, as leader of the Levites, when his staff bloomed, and even bore edible almonds. Numbers 17:10 mentions this as sign against rebels. It is nevertheless also a sign of God's election of Levites, as it were, 'against rebels', and therefore, it submitted, potentially fulfils the 'seal' requirement of covenants. Aaron's staff was, along with the ark itself and an urn of manna, kept in the holy of holies. Cf. Heb 9:1-5.

We are not given a clear sign/seal and therefore are left to at least to some degree speculate.

8.4. Ancillary Aspects

8.4.1. Why the Levites?

Whilst the question is somewhat superfluous as the context of the covenant makes it exactly clear as to 'Why the Levites?', it is none the less profitable in placing the Levitical Covenant in historical context.

The book of Exodus does not mention the choice of the Levites as priesthood. It does however mention God's choice of Aaron and his sons in priesthood. Exodus does mention various accounts of how the Levites interceded between God and Israel on their own initiative.

Above and beyond Moses and Aaron who were Levites, we also have recorded of how the Levites attacked the nation of Israel after they made a golden calf. It is somewhat unusual to consider violent punishment as intercession, but that is exactly what it was. If the Levites had not attacked the sons of Israel, then God would have had to punish them himself, and his punishment would have been worse.

Intercession works two ways. It protects the people against God and it protects God's holiness against the people. The Levites were able to tell which was required and when.

In Numbers 25 we have a similar incident, where Phineas the son of Eleazar interceded by killing an Israelite tempting God. Once again this priesthood is precipitated by violence. It was at this incident that God chose the Levites as his priesthood. (In terms of Hebrew symbolism *midrash* this a meaningful picture of the intercession of the Mosaic Law. Under Moses intercession required punishment, under the New Covenant intercession can be practised through mercy.)

God often confirms an established relationship only afterwards by covenant, and that is what I believed happened to the Levites. It had happened previously with both Abraham perhaps Noah also. It also happened in God's covenant with the whole of Israel through Moses. The episode with Phineas might have been the fact that prompted God to create the covenant, but the general relationship of intercession had been built for a far longer time.

8.4.2. The Levitical Covenant as Covenant of Peace

In various places God calls his covenant with Levi a covenant of peace. I.e. Malachi 2 and Numbers 25. What does this mean? This may have referred to a covenant as a treaty establishing peace between factions. As the Hebrew word, "shalom" is fairly wide and holds a variety of other meanings, there are other potential applications of the idea of peace also. Perhaps the better question would be "*Peace with whom?*" A psalmist composed the following poem:

Psalm 106:30

"Then Phineas stood up and interposed, and so the plague was stayed. And it was reckoned to him for righteousness for all generations forever."

In first instance the covenant is a covenant of peace with God. In similar terms to those given to Abraham, we read that Phineas was justified with God. The Levitical Covenant created a relationship of peace with God between him and the Levites. If there were not peace between God and the Levites, then they could not serve him in the office of priesthood.

Malachi confirms this saying,

"My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him as an object of reverence, so he revered me, and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and unrighteousness was not found on his lips; he walked with me in peace and uprightness and he turned many back from inequity."

The term, "covenant of peace" also occurs elsewhere in Scripture, such as Isaiah 54:10; Ezekiel 34:25 and 37:26. The covenant referred to in Isaiah refers to Noah's covenant as one of 'peace' whilst Ezekiel refers to a covenant God will make with David. In these instances covenant of peace also means, "peace with one's neighbours and peace with one's environment."

I therefore suggest that not only does the Levitical Covenant create a peace between the Levites and God; it also creates a peace between Israel and the Levites. The Levites would have to be respected and indeed, left alone as it were to fulfil the functions God would set over them.

8.4.3. The Levitical Covenant as Covenant of Priesthood

Malachi 2:1-9

*"And now, O priests, this commandment is for you.
If you will not hear,
And if you will not take it to heart,
To give glory to My name,"
Says the LORD of hosts,

"I will send a curse upon you,
And I will curse your blessings.
Yes, I have cursed them already,
Because you do not take it to heart.
"Behold, I will rebuke your descendants
And spread refuse on your faces,
The refuse of your solemn feasts;
And one will take you away with it.
Then you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you,
That My covenant with Levi may continue,"
Says the LORD of hosts.
"My covenant was with him, one of life and peace,*

*And I gave them to him that he might fear Me;
So he feared Me
And was reverent before My name.
The law of truth was in his mouth,
And injustice was not found on his lips.
He walked with Me in peace and equity,
And turned many away from iniquity.
"For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge,
And people should seek the law from his mouth;
For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.
But you have departed from the way;
You have caused many to stumble at the law.
You have corrupted the covenant of Levi,"
Says the LORD of hosts.
"Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base
Before all the people,
Because you have not kept My ways
But have shown partiality in the law."*

Nehemiah 13:29

Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

Through the prophet Malachi the Lord issued a judgment against the tribe of Levi for profaning his covenant. But here the Lord, if I may be so bold, runs into a legal difficulty. The Levitical covenant like the New Covenant and unlike the Mosaic Covenant is an *unconditional* covenant. God never said, "If you . . . then I will . . ." about the Levitical covenant. Now how does one breach a covenant without conditions?

The Levites did not break *the terms* of the covenant. That would be impossible. Nevertheless even unconditional covenants may be broken; – not by transgression of their terms but by subverting the covenant relationship. A marriage covenant is for example in general terms unconditional, but someone can still break the marriage covenant by committing adultery. And this happened to the Levites. They broke the Levitical covenant by corrupting the relationship that the covenant created. The

Levitical covenant created a very unique and holy fiduciary responsibility in the Levites.

They corrupted` the covenant because they obfuscated its purpose. God's intent with the covenant was to create a holy priesthood to serve between himself and the people. Rather than serving this purpose, the Levites corrupted it. They ceased mediating, ceased interceding. And so God takes great pains to explain to the priesthood and what their purpose is.

God explains that they are to serve between him and the people. The priesthood served in two special relationships. They had a special relationship with God and a special relationship with the people. They had to walk holy and pure before God, fulfilling their *intercessory role* between the people and God, and they had to walk wisely and knowledgeable before the people, so that they may fulfil their *teaching* role between God and the people.

As priestly tribe the Levites had special functions with respect to ministry in the tabernacle, judging, declaring, teaching and praying for the people. Their role would be that of righteousness, peace, mercy and equity. They did not have any territory of their own, as God himself would be their portion. They therefore fulfilled a kind of spiritual public administrative office.

The covenant with Levi is in this sense at least unbreakable. But how was God then to get the priesthood on track again? He explains that he would not honour their priesthood. Whilst they may be priests, God decided to exchange their priestly blessings for curses, and rebuke them.

The lesson of priesthood is the great lesson that the Levitical Covenant holds for New Covenant believers. It teaches us about what priesthood is, and what it means to be a consecrated people, and what it means to be an intercessory people. It also reminds us that, despite the fact that we are under the New Covenant as unconditional covenant, God can still judge and discipline people under an unconditional covenant. We as Christians can break the unconditional covenant under which we are by acting contrary to the relationship created by that covenant.

8.4.4. A Confirmed Covenant or a Separate Covenant?

Now to a more difficult question: Is the Levitical Covenant a confirmation of the Mosaic Covenant or is it an independent covenant that operates alongside the

Mosaic Covenant? The dominant indication by the way in which the Bible treats it is that the Levitical Covenant is an independent covenant, but an argument may be made that it is in fact part of the Mosaic Covenant. Either way the consequence remains the same.

There are various factors that intimate that the covenant is a confirmation of a particular part of the Mosaic Covenant. Firstly the Mosaic Covenant makes provision for a special priesthood. Secondly the covenant does not necessarily have clear terms, a clear sacrifice or a clear sign to seal the covenant. These are scattered in Numbers, and is not brought directly into covenant terms. Thirdly the book of Hebrews, juxtaposing the Old and New Covenants, juxtaposes the priesthoods of Levi and Melchizedek. Fourthly both covenants are national, formal and symbolic.

There are also factors which suggest that they are utterly separate covenants. The Levitical Covenant has its own unique audience or parties and relationship which is different to that of the Mosaic Covenant. Secondly the Levitical Covenant is unconditional, whereas the Mosaic Covenant is conditional. The Mosaic Covenant is a clearly conditional covenant, and sanctions its *breaking* by particular punishments. The Levitical Covenant is *unconditional*, and so God sanctions its *abuse* by extra-covenantal punishments, as confirmed by *prophets*. God for example never curses the Levites as is the punishment under the Mosaic Law. Rather he curses *their blessings for other* people. (This is a terrifying indictment, and may suggest that when we walk in disobedience and bless others, God may curse them for our sake.) Many Scriptures also treat the Levitical covenant as separate – such as Malachi 2 or Nehemiah 13.

An appropriate question we may ask when judging whether or not the Levitical Covenant is a separate covenant is, “Where does Numbers fit in?” The terms and realities of the Levitical Covenant are scattered throughout the book. We therefore have to wonder whether Numbers is a reflection of the Mosaic Covenant or of the Levitical Covenant.

It is submitted that it is best to under the circumstances to treat the Levitical Covenant as a separate but dependant covenant, which runs concurrently to the Mosaic Covenant. I also suggest that the terms, with the most likely candidates for the elements of the blood and the seal of the covenant are those as submitted above.