

Numbers 8:23-26

Background: Theologically the section continues the theme of the importance of ministry, particularly in the light of divine holiness. Those engaged in holy work have to be properly prepared and set apart for their responsibilities in a significant and specific way. Through these rites the Levites are distinguished from the rest of the community, and the importance of such ministry for the community's well-being is duly stressed

I. 25 Years

a. Levites

- i. Adam's sin caused a disruption in the relationship between man and God and thus demonstrated the need of a mediator between the separated parties. The priests in OT times were to serve in the role of mediator
- ii. Finally the age of service for Levites is fixed as twenty-five to fifty (vv 23–26). The older Levitical tradition about the age at which service is to begin (Num 4:3) is thus extended, probably in the light of contemporary need.
- iii. At the heart of religion was a relationship with God; to be an Israelite or a Jew was to know and maintain a continuous relationship with the living God. This relationship found its outward expression in a variety of contexts: the covenant, the temple, worship, and every facet of daily life. Thus religion, understood as a relationship, had two perspectives, the relationship with God and that with fellow human beings; it had both a personal and a communal dimension to it. The priests were the guardians and servants of this life of relationship, which was at the heart of OT religion; all their functions can best be understood within the context of a relationship between God and Israel.
- iv. Priestly duties, in general, fell into three areas (Dt 33:8–10). First, they were responsible in conjunction with the high priest for declaring God's will to the people. Second, they had responsibilities in religious education; they were to teach to Israel God's ordinances and Law (Torah; Dt 33:10). Third, they were to be the servants of the tabernacle, participating in Israel's sacrifices and worship. There were a number of other duties which may have fallen to them, which they would have shared with the Levites in general.
- v. The Levites were divided into three principal families, the descendants of Kohath, Gershon, and Merari, respectively (Nm 4). Each of these families

had particular responsibilities with respect to the care and transport of the tabernacle. The sons of Kohath carried the tabernacle furniture (after it had been covered by the priests), the sons of Gershon cared for the coverings and screens, and the sons of Merari carried and erected the tabernacle's frame. The priests, by contrast, were responsible for the transportation of the ark of the covenant. The role of each Levite, as servant of the tabernacle, was restricted; he undertook his professional duties between the ages of 25 and 50 (Nm 8:24–26).

- vi. Although many of the duties of the Levites were of a mundane nature, they also had a very significant religious role. The Law required that all the firstborn, including firstborn V 2, p 1758 p 1758 sons, be given to God, recalling the slaying of the firstborn at the exodus from Egypt. The Levites' role in religion was that of being accepted by God in the place of the firstborn sons of Israel (Nm 3:11–13); their cattle, too, were accepted in place of the Israelites' firstborn cattle. In the census taken in the time of Moses, the firstborn Israelites exceeded the number of the Levites and a five-shekel redemption fee had to be paid into the priestly coffers for each person in excess (Nm 3:40–51). The representative and substitutionary nature of the Levites can be seen in Israelite religion. Like the priests, they played a part in the larger activity of mediation between God and Israel.
- vii. Priestly duties, in general, fell into three areas (Dt 33:8–10). First, they were responsible in conjunction with the high priest for declaring God's will to the people. Second, they had responsibilities in religious education; they were to teach to Israel God's ordinances and Law (Torah; Dt 33:10). Third, they were to be the servants of the tabernacle, participating in Israel's sacrifices and worship. There were a number of other duties which may have fallen to them, which they would have shared with the Levites in general.
- viii. The office was significant, nevertheless, and involved a special ritual of investiture, special clothing, and certain special responsibilities. While the high priest's duties were similar in principle to those of other priests, he had certain exclusive responsibilities. To some extent, his duties were administrative, pertaining to all the priests of whom he had charge. But his position was more weighty than that of an administrator; just as all priests were the servants and guardians of the covenant relationship, the high priest was chief servant and chief guardian. In his hands rested

spiritual responsibility for the entire people of God, and therein lay the true honor and gravity of his position.

- ix. The duties of Levi are summarized in **Deuteronomy 33:8–11**, where oracular guidance and theological instruction are just as important as their priestly duties. It is therefore no surprise that Jehoshaphat later uses them as teachers of law (2 Chr 17:7–9). Nevertheless, the ordinary Israelite thought of them primarily as priestly (Jgs 17:13).
 - x. Their service was that of the meeting tent (Nm 1:50–53) and later, the temple (1 Chr 23:25–32). Within Levi the Bible makes a clear distinction between the high priest (sometimes merely called “the priest,” 1 Sm 1:9) who came from one branch of Aaron’s family; the rest of the priests, also of particular families; and a mass of subordinate Levites, who had lesser tasks. In early days they packed and moved the portable
 - xi. Since Levi could not amass wealth, the tribe was to be supported by gifts and tithes (Nm 18:21); like the widow, orphan, and stranger, they were commended to the care of God’s people (Dt 14:29)
 - xii. Levi, as a tribe, could therefore own no tribal territory: God himself was their inheritance (Nm 18:20). However, they were given 48 villages, with their pasturelands, in which to live (Jos 21:1–42). These included the six cities of refuge (Jos 20:1–9).
 - xiii. Next **the Levites** placed **their hands on the heads of the** sacrificial animals, transferring to them their own sense of both guilt and commitment. The reason for setting **the Levites apart** was that they were to serve as substitutes for **the firstborn** of all **Israel** who rightfully belonged to the Lord because He had redeemed them from death in the 10th plague **in Egypt** (vv. 15–18; cf. comments on 3:11–13).
 - xiv. With all this done, **the Levites** went to the tabernacle to commence their ministry (vv. 20–22). This aspect of their work, compared with transporting the tabernacle and its furnishings, could be undertaken when they were **25 years** of age rather than 30 (v. 24; cf. 4:3). They could continue to serve up to **the age of 50** when they would **retire** but could return as assistants to the younger men (vv. 25–26). These limitations insured that **the Levites** would serve the Lord in the prime years of their lives
- b. 25 Years Upward
 - c. Shall Enter
 - i. Perform Service
 - 1. Perform - military service develops into **service in the cult**

ii. Work of the Tent

1. **Work – Service rendered**

II. 50 Years

i. Retire

1. Retire—

a. **Root - to turn back, to return, draw back, refresh**

b. **Exempt of service ; return from service**

c. In the Qal stem it has been suggested that there are ten different meanings for *šûb* with subdivisions within each, plus a few uses difficult to pinpoint (Holladay, p. 59ff.). Of these two or three merit special observance. To begin with, the basic meaning of *šûb* “to (re)turn” implying physical motion or movement appears over 270 times

d. who is no longer permitted to perform

2. Service

a. The meaning of this verse is ambiguous. Does it mean to say that after the age of fifty Levites would no longer perform maintenance functions, but only “assist” (the verb *šēret*) in other ways, performing less demanding duties

b. in vv 24–25, or does it recapitulate the overall characterization of the status of the Levites, as “serving” but not officiating? (See the NOTES on vv 15 and 19, above, and cf. Num 18:2–5.

ii. Not Work any More

III. Years of Assistance

a. Assist Brothers

i. Assist – Service Levite

ii. Brothers

iii. In the Tent of Meetings

b. To keep an obligation

i. Obligations

1. Obligations -duties to be carried out Nu 3:7f, 36, something to which someone is obligated Nu 8:26 1C 25:8, pl. 26:12 2C 7:6 8:14 31:16f 35:2; לְעֵשֶׂת דָּוָר duty to be discharged

2. Hebrew the homophone *mišmārôt* represents the plural of masculine singular *mišmār*, and means “tour of duty” (Neh 7:3; 13:30; 1 Chr 26:12; 2 Chr 35:2;
 - ii. Shall Do no Work
- c. Deal with the Levites
 - i. Concerning their obligations

Word Studies

Levites

At first Levi was apparently a “secular” tribe like any other. True, Moses and Aaron were of Levi (Ex 2:1), but no stress is laid on this. Levi’s later position was God’s reward for its costly faithfulness when Israel rebelled against God (Ex 32:25–29); this inaugurated the “covenant with Levi” (Nm 18:19). Henceforth the tribe of Levi would be accepted by God instead of Israel’s firstborn sons, who belonged to him by the law of “firstfruits” (Nm 3:11–13). Levi, as a tribe, could therefore own no tribal territory: God himself was their inheritance (Nm 18:20). However, they were given 48 villages, with their pasturelands, in which to live (Jos 21:1–42). These included the six cities of refuge (Jos 20:1–9).

Since Levi could not amass wealth, the tribe was to be supported by gifts and tithes (Nm 18:21); like the widow, orphan, and stranger, they were commended to the care of God’s people (Dt 14:29). Since they were God’s tribe, Joab was unwilling to include Levi in David’s census (1

Chr 21:6; cf¹. Nm 1:49). Naturally, Levi did not serve in war except in a religious capacity (2 Chr 20:21). Their service was that of the meeting tent (Nm 1:50–53) and later, the temple (1 Chr 23:25–32). Within Levi the Bible makes a clear distinction between the high priest (sometimes merely called “the priest,” 1 Sm 1:9) who came from one branch of Aaron’s family; the rest of the priests, also of particular families; and a mass of subordinate Levites, who had lesser tasks. In early days they packed and moved the portable V 2, p 1327 p 1327 meeting tent (Nm 1:50, 51), among other duties; in later days they apparently served as porters and choristers (1 Chr 16:42). The duties of Levi are summarized in Deuteronomy 33:8–11, where oracular guidance and theological instruction are just as important as their priestly duties. It is therefore no surprise that Jehoshaphat later uses them as teachers of law (2 Chr 17:7–9). Nevertheless, the ordinary Israelite thought of them primarily as priestly (Jgs 17:13).

Later references to the lasting covenant with Levi are found in Jeremiah 33:20–26 and Malachi 3:3–4. Members of the tribe returned from the exile (Ezr 2:36–42), apparently more coming from the priestly than the wider levitical section. Barnabas, in N²T days, belonged to the tribe of Levi (Acts 4:36); and indeed among modern Jews, wherever the surname Levi is found, a member of the tribe probably lives on. But to the author of Hebrews, with the coming of the priesthood of Christ, the special position of Levi has lost its meaning (Heb 7:11–14).³

The role of the priesthood may be seen most clearly in the context of Israelite religion as a whole. At the heart of religion was a relationship with God; to be an Israelite or a Jew was to know and maintain a continuous relationship with the living God. This relationship found its outward expression in a variety of contexts: the covenant, the temple, worship, and every facet of daily life. Thus religion, understood as a relationship, had two perspectives, the relationship with God and that with fellow human beings; it had both a personal and a communal dimension to it. The priests were the guardians and servants of this life of relationship, which was at the heart of O⁴T religion; all their functions can best be understood within the context of a relationship between God and Israel. The prophets, too, were servants of the covenant relationship. While the priests functioned as the normal servants of religion, the prophets’ role was more that of calling a delinquent people back to the relationship with God in times of crisis.

In the O⁵T, there are frequent references to both priests and Levites; in a number of biblical texts, however, the distinction is not clear (see, e.g.⁶, Dt 18:1–8). From the scholarly point of

¹cf. compare

²NT New Testament

³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “[Levi, Tribe Of,](#)” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1326–1327.

⁴OT Old Testament

⁵OT Old Testament

⁶e.g. for example

view, the precise relationship between priests and Levites is a continuing problem which has not yet been fully resolved. In general terms, only the sons of Aaron were to assume the role of priests; all other Levites would have religious functions, though technically they would not be priests. While this distinction is clear in most biblical texts, in others there is lack of certainty and clarity. It is clear, however, that *priests* (Levites descended from Aaron) and *Levites* (other than the descendants of Aaron) all had professional religious duties to perform. The precise nature of those duties varied from time to time in the course of Israel's history.

The Origins of the Priesthood. The priesthood in Israel began during the time of Moses and Aaron, but antecedents to the Hebrew V 2, p 1755 p 1755 priesthood and the context in which it began occur in Genesis.

The Background to Priesthood. Genesis refers to “priests” a number of times, though they are all non-Hebrew priests. Potiphera, an Egyptian priest of On, had a daughter called Asenath who married Joseph (Gn 41:45); he is indicative of the presence of priests in most religions of the ancient Near East. Egyptian priests possessed land and received a stipend from the pharaoh (Gn 47:22, 26). There is also a reference to a priest called Melchizedek (Gn 14:18), whose theological significance emerges more clearly in the N⁷T. In Genesis, Melchizedek is described as a priest-king; he ruled Salem during Abram's time and was a “priest of the God of Highest Heaven.” Little more is known of him, other than the words of his blessing of Abram (Gn 14:19, 20).

Although there are no explicit references to Hebrew priests in Genesis, several passages illustrate the need for a priesthood and anticipate the later activity of the priests. The need for priesthood may be seen from the time of Adam; Adam's sin caused a disruption in the relationship between man and God and thus demonstrated the need of a mediator between the separated parties. The priests in O⁸T times were to serve in the role of mediator. The awareness of the broken relationship may be seen at many other points in the narrative of Genesis, particularly in passages describing offerings and sacrifices. Noah built an altar and made offerings to God after the flood (Gn 8:20). Abram engaged in sacrifice in the formation of his covenant with God (Gn 15:9, 10), and Jacob, too, offered sacrifices (Gn 31:54). In all these instances, the heads of families functioned as priests, though they are not named priests; they stood before God, as representatives of their people, and sought to establish and maintain that relationship with God which is the foundation of human existence. When the religion of the patriarchs, which was based on the family unit, developed into the religion of a nation, Israel, there arose at the same time the need for a formal and professional priesthood.

The Mosaic Establishment. The transition from patriarchal religion to the religion of Israel took place in the time of Moses. The exodus from Egypt was not only the liberation of a group of Hebrew slaves, but the birth of the nation of Israel. The nation that was born in the exodus was given its constitution in the covenant of Sinai. The Law of this covenant established the

⁷NT New Testament

⁸OT Old Testament

foundations and origins of Israelite priesthood. It provides insight into the three basic categories to be considered: (a) the high priest; (b) the priests; and (c) the Levites.

(a) *The High Priest*. Any large and complex organization requires a head or leader, and this was true also of the Hebrew priesthood (though in its early days it was a small organization). The covenant was established through Moses, the prophet, through whom God gave the offer and substance of the covenant relationship; religious life within the covenant was to be the primary responsibility of Aaron, who was the first and chief priest.

In the earliest days of Israel's priesthood, it is probable that the chief priest's office was relatively informal; he was chief or leader among his fellow priests. He had a title, but it was essentially a description of his work: "the greatest priest among his brethren" (the literal sense of Lv 21:10). The office was significant, nevertheless, and involved a special ritual of investiture, special clothing, and certain special responsibilities. While the high priest's duties were similar in principle to those of other priests, he had certain exclusive responsibilities. To some extent, his duties were administrative, pertaining to all the priests of whom he had charge. But his position was more weighty than that of an administrator; just as all priests were the servants and guardians of the covenant relationship, the high priest was chief servant and chief guardian. In his hands rested spiritual responsibility for the entire people of God, and therein lay the true honor and gravity of his position.

This spiritual seniority of the high priest is seen most clearly in certain tasks he undertook within Israel's life of worship. The clearest example may be seen in the annual observation of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). On that day alone, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and, standing before the "mercy seat," he sought God's forgiveness and mercy for the whole nation of Israel (Lv 16:1–9). It is in that ceremony that Israel's covenant faith is seen most clearly. Israel's religion was one of relationship with a holy God, and human evil disrupted that relationship. While all worship and sacrifices throughout the year were concerned with the continuation of the relationship, the Day of Atonement was the most solemn day of the year in which the attention of all the people focused upon the meaning of their existence. Life only held meaning if the relationship with God could be maintained; the high priest had the great honor and heavy burden of seeking God's mercy for all Israel.

The investiture, or ordination, of the high priest, and of Aaron, the first holder of the office, illustrates further the nature of the office. The ordination service lasted for a full week, and is described in detail in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8. The service was a joint service, involving not only the ordination of Aaron V 2, p 1756 p 1756 as high priest, but also of his sons as priests. It was held at the entrance to the tabernacle in the presence of all the Israelites who assembled for the occasion. The ordination involved a number of symbolic activities, all indicating the nature and gravity of the occasion. The persons to be ordained were washed with water, symbolizing the necessity of purity in those who were to serve God as high priest and as priests. They were then robed in special garments. They were anointed with oil (as was the tabernacle itself), signifying separation (being set aside) for divine service. Certain sacrifices (a bull and two rams) and offerings were made, in which the persons being ordained participated; they signified the confession and atonement for sins in those about to be ordained, thanksgiving to God, and consecration to the service of God. The dominant theme running through the entire seven-day service of ordination is that of the holiness and dedication required of Aaron and his sons in order to serve God properly, for they were being ordained into the service (Ex 29:44) of a God

who is holy. The service itself was conducted by Moses, and although Moses is not normally referred to as a priest, it may be that his role in ordaining the high priest and first priests accounts for the single designation of him as a “priest” (Ps 99:6).

The special clothing to be worn by the high priest Aaron and his successors was also symbolic of the nature and gravity of the office. The basic garment was a coat of checkered design. Upon this was placed the robe of the ephod, a simple blue tunic with a hole for the head to go through; the skirts of the robe had attached to them, in an alternating design, representations of pomegranates (made of blue, purple, and scarlet material) and golden bells, which were heard when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies. Above the robe of the ephod came the ephod itself, skillfully made from gold, blue, purple, and scarlet materials, with finely twined linen. The ephod was suspended by two shoulder pieces, in which were inserted two onyx stones; on each of the stones six names of the tribes of Israel were engraved. The breastpiece, made of the same materials as the ephod, was a square pouch attached to the ephod by means of cords from the four gold rings at each corner. Four rows of precious stones were attached to the pouch, with three different stones per row representing the 12 tribes of Israel individually. The inside of the pouch contained the Urim and Thummim; although there cannot be absolute certainty on the nature of these objects, they were the means by which God expressed his will to his people through the high priest. (They may have been two flat stones, with the equivalent of “yes” [*thummim*] and “no” [*urim*] inscribed on them.) Around his waist, the high priest wore a girdle, or belt, embroidered with fine needlework. He wore a turban, and attached to the front of the turban by blue lace was a gold plate or “crown,” on which were inscribed the words “Holy to the Lord.”

The special clothing worn by the high priest was symbolic of the nature and importance of his office; although all the symbolism cannot be determined, some of it is made clear in the biblical text. There are three particular themes in the symbolism. The first is beauty. The sense of beauty emerges from the quality and design of all the items of clothing, together with the use of color and precious stones. But beauty is dominant in the breastplate; the Hebrew word, translated approximately as “breastplate,” has as its basic sense “beauty” or “excellence.” The clothing symbolizes beauty, while beauty describes the office; the two other themes associated with the symbolism bring out the excellence of the office.

The second theme is the role of the priest as representative of Israel before God. This essential dimension of the office of the high priest is explicitly identified in the names of the tribes of Israel in the two onyx stones in the ephod, and in the 12 precious stones attached to the breastplate. The high priest enters God’s presence to seek deliverance from God’s judgment (the breastplate is identified with judgment; Ex 28:15) for his people and in order to keep the people constantly in God’s remembrance (Ex 28:12), as symbolized by the two onyx stones. The third theme is the role of the high priest as the representative of God to Israel. This dimension of the office is seen in the Urim and Thummim, kept in the breastpiece, by means of which God made known his will to Israel. The high priest, Aaron, fully robed, was a splendid figure, and the splendor of his garments indicated the magnificence of the office with which he had been entrusted.

The high priesthood was to be passed on within the family (for the high priest was expected to be a married man), although in later history, the practice was not always adhered to. On Aaron’s death, the office passed to Eleazar, one of his four sons.

(b) *The Priests*. Priests took office not as the result of a particular vocation, but by virtue of priestly descent. Thus the first priests were the four sons of Aaron: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar; these four were ordained at the same time that Aaron was ordained high priest (Ex 28:1). Like him, they had special clothing, which was basically similar, though it lacked the distinctive garments of the high [V 2, p 1757](#) [p 1757](#) priest (the special ephod, the breastpiece, and the crown). The priesthood would be passed down through their sons.

A depiction of an O⁹T priest.

The sanctity of the priestly office was such that it was preserved from degeneration through specific laws. A man must be a descendant of Aaron to be a priest, but he was also required to meet a variety of other qualifications. He would not marry a divorcée or a former prostitute (Lv 21:7). If he was afflicted by certain kinds of disease or congenital defects, he was barred from priestly office (e.g.¹⁰, blindness, lameness, mutilation, being a hunchback or dwarf; Lv 21:16–23). The principle involved was similar to that applying to animals used in sacrifice—only those free from defect or blemish were suitable for divine service.

In the earliest days of the priesthood there is some information provided in the biblical text concerning the specific duties of the priests. Eleazar had overall responsibility for the tabernacle and its offerings (Nm 4:16), assisted Moses in a number of duties, such as numbering the people and dividing the land (Nm 26:1, 2; 32:2), and later served as an adviser to Joshua. Ithamar was responsible for the construction of the tabernacle (Ex 38:21) and supervised the families of the Gershonites and Merarites (Nm 4:28–33). Nadab and Abihu, however, died soon after their ordination as a result of a sinful act in their priestly duties (Lv 10:1–7), which may have been related in part to drunkenness (Lv 10:8, 9).

Priestly duties, in general, fell into three areas (Dt 33:8–10). First, they were responsible in conjunction with the high priest for declaring God's will to the people. Second, they had responsibilities in religious education; they were to teach to Israel God's ordinances and Law (Torah; Dt 33:10). Third, they were to be the servants of the tabernacle, participating in Israel's sacrifices and worship. There were a number of other duties which may have fallen to them, which they would have shared with the Levites in general.

The priests, along with all other Levites, did not hold any land, as did the other Israelite tribes. Their task was to be entirely in the direct service to God. The absence of land, however, meant that they could not support and feed themselves as could other men and women. Consequently, the law specified that they could be supported for their services by the people as a whole. They were to receive, from worshipers, portions of animals that were brought to the tabernacle, corn, wine, oil, and wool.

(c) *The Levites*. This term includes the priests, in a broad sense, for the sons of Aaron belonged to the tribe of Levi. For practical purposes, however, the Levites were those of the tribe other than the priests. The Levites also functioned in the service of the tabernacle, though

⁹OT Old Testament

¹⁰e.g. for example

they had a subordinate position. They, too, were professional men and were paid in money and in kind for their services. Though they did not inherit tribal territory of their own, there were a number of cities set aside for their use (Nm 35:1–8) and pasturelands were designated outside those cities for their livestock.

The Levites were divided into three principal families, the descendants of Kohath, Gershon, and Merari, respectively (Nm 4). Each of these families had particular responsibilities with respect to the care and transport of the tabernacle. The sons of Kohath carried the tabernacle furniture (after it had been covered by the priests), the sons of Gershon cared for the coverings and screens, and the sons of Merari carried and erected the tabernacle's frame. The priests, by contrast, were responsible for the transportation of the ark of the covenant. The role of each Levite, as servant of the tabernacle, was restricted; he undertook his professional duties between the ages of 25 and 50 (Nm 8:24–26).

Although many of the duties of the Levites were of a mundane nature, they also had a very significant religious role. The Law required that all the firstborn, including firstborn sons, be given to God, recalling the slaying of the firstborn at the exodus from Egypt. The Levites' role in religion was that of being accepted by God in the place of the firstborn sons of Israel (Nm 3:11–13); their cattle, too, were accepted in place of the Israelites' firstborn cattle. In the census taken in the time of Moses, the firstborn Israelites exceeded the number of the Levites and a five-shekel redemption fee had to be paid into the priestly coffers for each person in excess (Nm 3:40–51). The representative and substitutionary nature of the Levites can be seen in Israelite religion. Like the priests, they played a part in the larger activity of mediation between God and Israel.

The law of Deuteronomy specifies a number of duties which may have fallen upon both priests and Levites (though the texts are ambiguous). These duties included participation in the activity of the law courts as judges, perhaps with special reference to religious crimes (Dt 17:8, 9), taking care of the book of the law (Dt 17:18), controlling the lives and health of lepers (Dt 24:8), and participating directly in the conduct of covenant renewal ceremonies (Dt 27:9¹¹

Perform- military service ¹²> **service in the cult**¹³

Work – Service rendered

Retire – to turn back, to return, draw back, refresh

¹¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, [“Priests and Levites,”](#) in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1754–1758.

¹²> develops into

¹³ Ludwig Koehler et al., [The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 995.

Assist- Service

Obligations -duties to be carried out Nu 3:7f, 36, something to which someone is obligated Nu 8:26 1C 25:8, pl. 26:12 2C 7:6 8:14 31:16f 35:2; מִשְׁמָרְךָ duty to be discharged ¹⁴

Commentary Studies

In the final section (vv 23–26) a definitive view of the proper age for Levitical service is given. Though the possibility that this is a later addition to the book, updating Num 4:3, cannot be excluded, it is also arguably the author's. He has let the traditional age, deriving probably from Levitical sources, stand for a time, having linked it more particularly with the census than with service. Here he makes a final statement on the matter which doubtless takes into account the needs of his own time. The linguistic peculiarities may point to influence later than the author, but there is little evidence with which to work. The link between “service” and “warfare” is held in common with Num 4:3, and a contribution at this point by the author himself is perfectly possible.¹⁵

Finally the age of service for Levites is fixed as twenty-five to fifty (vv 23–26). The older Levitical tradition about the age at which service is to begin (Num 4:3) is thus extended, probably in the light of contemporary need. With the question of pedigree paramount in post-exilic times, properly authenticated Levites may have been at a premium. The earlier tradition had been so closely tied to the Levitical census in Num 4 that it was possible to approach the issue of service directly at this point, and to give a different and definitive age at which it was proper for service to begin. It was appropriate enough to add this note after the rite for the cleansing of Levites had been described.

Theologically the section continues the theme of the importance of ministry, particularly in the light of divine holiness. Those engaged in holy work have to be properly prepared and set apart for their responsibilities in a significant and specific way. Through these rites the Levites are distinguished from the rest of the community, and the importance of such ministry for the community's well-being is duly stressed. This is a continuation of the main theological themes in Num 3–4. The distinctive emphasis of this section is that the Levites are nevertheless not

¹⁴ Ludwig Koehler et al., [*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 650.

¹⁵ Phillip J. Budd, [*Numbers*](#), vol. 5, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1984), 92.

remote from the community. Through the laying on of hands they in some sense represent the people at large, and constitute an offering from the people. Unlike the priests they do not receive anointing or special vestments. Like laymen they wash their clothes for the special rites. They are perhaps something of a bridge between priests and people. Distinctiveness in ministry combined with a significant solidarity with those ministered to constitute a fuller picture of service and ministry among the people of God.¹⁶

24. The period of service for Levites was to extend from twenty-five to fifty years of age. This duration is unusual and probably indicates that Num 8:23–26 derive from a different code of practice. See the NOTES on Num 4:2 for a discussion of the different minimum ages of service.

must serve in the work force. The cognate formula *lišbô' šābā'* requires special comment. It is the book of Numbers that uses the term *šābā'* in its most basic sense of “work force,” the sense most common for the Akkadian cognate *šabu* (CA¹⁷D Š, 40–45, under *šābu*). Elsewhere in biblical literature, Hebrew *šābā'* most often refers to the heavenly “hosts” (Isa 40:26), and quite frequently to military “forces” (1 Chr 9:11).

25. At the age of fifty, a Levite could retire from active service in the Tabernacle.

26. The meaning of this verse is ambiguous. Does it mean to say that after the age of fifty Levites would no longer perform maintenance functions, but only “assist” (the verb *šēret*) in other ways, performing less demanding duties? To put the question another way: does v 26 link up directly with the preceding statements in vv 24–25, or does it recapitulate the overall characterization of the status of the Levites, as “serving” but not officiating? (See the NOTES on vv 15 and 19, above, and cf. Num 18:2–5.) The former alternative is preferable, because vv 23–26 appear to be a separate statement.

duties. The plural *mišmārôt* means “duties.” It represents the plural of the feminine singular form *mišmeret* used so frequently in chap. 8, and in other texts dealing with levitical assignments. In late biblical and postbiblical Hebrew the homophone *mišmārôt* represents the plural of masculine singular *mišmār*, and means “tour of duty” (Neh 7:3; 13:30; 1 Chr 26:12; 2 Chr 35:2; and in the Mishna, *Ta'anit* 4:2).¹⁸

¹⁶ Phillip J. Budd, [Numbers](#), vol. 5, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1984), 94.

¹⁷CAD *The Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago*, ed. A. L. Oppenheim et al.

¹⁸ Baruch A. Levine, [Numbers 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 4, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 278–279.

8:12–19. Next **the Levites** placed **their hands on the heads of the** sacrificial animals, transferring to them their own sense of both guilt and commitment. The reason for setting **the Levites apart** was that they were to serve as substitutes for **the firstborn** of all **Israel** who rightfully belonged to the Lord because He had **redeemed them from death in the 10th plague in Egypt** (vv. 15–18; cf. comments on 3:11–13). Since **the Levites** were the Lord's it was His prerogative to give them **as gifts to Aaron and** the priests so they might care for the tabernacle and its precincts and so deliver the secular community from the danger of coming into direct contact with the holy things of God (8:19; cf. 1:53).

8:20–26. With all this done, **the Levites** went to the tabernacle to commence their ministry (vv. 20–22). This aspect of their work, compared with transporting the tabernacle and its furnishings, could be undertaken when they were **25 years** of age rather than 30 (v. 24; cf. 4:3). They could continue to serve up to **the age of 50** when they would **retire** but could return as assistants to the younger men (vv. 25–26). These limitations insured that **the Levites** would serve the Lord in the prime years of their lives.¹⁹

Numbers 4:3

¹⁹ Eugene H. Merrill, [“Numbers.”](#) in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 224.