

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

PRIESTS AND LEVITES

GEORGE R. BERRY
COLGATE UNIVERSITY

DOUBTLESS the most perplexing questions concerning the Old Testament treatment of the priests and Levites are these: Who were the Levites and what was their connection with the priests? and, What is the connection between the Zadokites, sons of Zadok, and the Aaronites, sons of Aaron?

Ch. 40-48 of Ezekiel, the P code, and the works of the Chronicler are of particular importance in this discussion. I refer to my published papers for the view that these concluding chapters of Ezekiel are much later than the time of Ezekiel¹. In accordance with these conclusions of mine I shall consider these chapters not as related to the exile but to the Maccabean period.

There seems to be good reason for the acceptance of the general conclusion of Professor Torrey² that the only source used by the Chronicler in Ezra-Nehemiah was the memoir of Nehemiah, comprising most of ch. 1-2, 4-6 of Nehemiah; that no sources aside from the canonical books were used by him in the Books of Chronicles; and that the material not based on these sources is original with the Chronicler and therefore unhistorical. The date of the Chronicler is probably not earlier than 300 B. C. It is a question whether the unhistorical character of the material of the Chronicler is due to anachronism, the transference of the institutions of his own

¹ "The Authorship of Ezekiel 40-48", *JBL* 34 (1915), 17-40; "The Date of Ezekiel 45 1-22 and 47 12-48 22", *JBL* 40 (1921), 70-75.

² *Ezra Studies*.

day to an earlier time, or to actual invention. It seems to me that the latter explanation is ordinarily the correct one and hence that the unhistorical statements are largely ideal, i. e., imaginary.

There are several strata or revisions in P, and it contains some preexilic material, not confined entirely to the code H. It was probably written in Palestine, by Jerusalem priests, and completed at some time between 500 and 400 B. C. By general agreement, it contains much unhistorical material. Here, as in the case of the Chronicler, it is often held that the unhistorical material comes largely from anachronism, but the ideal standpoint seems to be the more probable and usual explanation. The picture of the tabernacle in P, for example, it is generally agreed, is purely imaginary, although based in a general way upon the temple at Jerusalem. If the tabernacle itself is imaginary, other features associated with it are quite sure to have the same character.

These introductory statements bring us to the specific question: Who were the Levites and what was their connection with the priests?

According to the more usual view expressed in P and the work of the Chronicler, only the descendants of Aaron are priests; all other members of the tribe of Levi are known as Levites and do the subordinate work in the temple, being, of course, inferior to the priests.

Except in P, the Chronicler, and Ezekiel ch. 40-48, the evidence for this distinction of priests and Levites is very slight. It is generally agreed that it was not an early distinction. In the early Old Testament period, of course, any one could be a priest. The limitation of the priestly office to the tribe of Levi came into being gradually, but from an early period of the kingdom it seems to have been recognized as at least the usual thing. This does not mean, of course, that all priests were actually Levites, but that they ordinarily claimed that descent. The original form of H, which was preexilic, spoke frequently of priests, but apparently without further definition. It is clear that at least up to the exile all Levites were priests, the representations of P and the Chronicler

for this period, which tell a different story, being clearly unhistorical. This situation is portrayed in Deuteronomy, where the common expression is *the priests the Levites*, meaning *the Levite priests*, with sometimes such phrases as *the priests the Levites, even all the tribe of Levi*, Deut. 181. In much of the literature after the exile there is no reference to priests or Levites. Often, also, in this period, priests are mentioned but not described, with no mention of Levites; this is the usage in Haggai (2 11-13), Zechariah (7 3, 5), and Joel (1 9, 13; 2 17). In other places, however, all Levites are represented as priests; this is the usage in Malachi (2 1, 4, 7, 9; 3 3), in Is. 66 21 (Trito-Isaiah), where the translation of the original text probably should be: "And of them also will I take for Levite priests, saith Yahweh", in some postexilic passages in Jeremiah (33 18, 21, 22), and in Zech. 12 12. All these passages may perhaps be regarded as earlier than the publication of P except the Zechariah passage which is much later than P but apparently has not been influenced by it. Aside from Ezekiel ch. 40-48, which will be discussed later, the only postexilic passage which shows the distinction between priests and Levites is Ps. 135 19-20, where the "house of Levi" appears by the side of the "house of Aaron". This psalm is later than P, and seems to be the only passage showing the influence of P on this point before the Maccabean period.

It is also the case that both P and the Chronicler show considerable variation from their own prevailing view on this point. In several passages of P priests are simply mentioned as such, without further definition; such are Lev. ch. 6-7; ch. 12-15; ch. 27; Num. 5 9-28; 6 1-21; 15 22-31. In a few passages in P, also, the term Levites is used concerning the whole tribe; such are Ex. 6 25; Lev. 26 32-33; Num. 35 1-8. The Chronicler speaks of "the priests the Levites", 2 Chron. 30 27, etc. Not only does the memoir of Nehemiah, Neh. 2 16, omit the Levites in an enumeration of the various classes of the people, but this is also done in a similar way by the Chronicler, Neh. 9 32, 34.

Except in one passage in the Psalms, then, and in the concluding chapters of Ezekiel, from the Maccabean time, the

Levites as a subordinate class distinct from the priests are unknown in the postexilic usage, and in a considerable number of passages, mentioned above, from the postexilic period, all Levites are regarded as priests. This makes it evident that the representation of the Chronicler, that the Levites were in existence as a distinct class inferior to the priests from about 538 B. C., Ezra 1 5; 2 40, 70; 3 8-10, 12, etc., is unhistorical. That suggests that the whole representation in P and the Chronicler concerning the Levites as a class distinct from the priests is essentially imaginative. In what sense this is the case will be discussed later.

Further, P recognizes only two classes of temple ministrants, priests and Levites. The Chronicler, however, in many passages has five classes, in this order: priests, Levites, singers, porters, and Nethinim, the latter class sometimes including "the children of Solomon's servants" as a sub-class; such is the representation in Ezra 2 40-58, 70; 7 24, etc. Those here called porters were פִּתְּחֵי, the door-keepers or watchmen in and about the temple. In other passages in the Chronicler, however, the singers and porters, while recognized as distinct classes, are included under the Levites, 1 Chron. 23 3, 5; 16 4; 31 14, etc., and the Nethinim are often ignored. The representation of the Chronicler is thus much confused, it seeming to be a matter of uncertainty whether there are here two classes or more, up to five. Singers, porters, and Nethinim, as distinct from Levites, are classes unknown in the Old Testament outside of the Chronicler. This has a distinctly unhistorical look.

The name Nethinim, meaning *those given*, indicates that those thus described were temple-slaves, given to the temple. These are stated by the Chronicler, Ezra 8 20, to have been those "whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites", a statement which at any rate shows the conception of the Chronicler in reference to the essential character of those thus described. The phrase "the children of Solomon's servants" also points to the view that these were regarded as a class of slaves given by Solomon to the temple. The Gibeonites also were such temple-slaves according to Josh. 9 23, 27 (these statements probably belonging to JE). It

is intrinsically probable that the subordinate service in the temple was before the exile rendered by slaves since this is in accord with the custom in other ancient temples, these slaves of course being foreigners.

Actual history in later times knows of only two kinds of subordinate ministrants in the temple, singers and porters; these are all that are recognized in the Talmud (Baudissin, in *Hastings' Dict. of the Bible*, vol. IV, p. 94). It is probable in the nature of the case, as it is generally agreed, that these two kinds of service were rendered in the temple before the exile. Hence the two classes of temple attendants, singers and porters, were doubtless known as such before the exile, while the term Nethinim was a general term, descriptive of the position of those meant as slaves but not defining their duties. Hence singers and porters, approaching the matter from one standpoint, and Nethinim, from another, may all naturally be preexilic terms although not found in preexilic usage. P virtually recognizes the identification of his Levites with the Nethinim by applying to them the term נְתִינִים, identical in meaning with נְתִינִים, in Num. 35; 8 14, 19; 18 6. In these passages the Levites have essentially the status of slaves to the priests, which is the idea also in 1 Chron. 23 2a.

P and the Chronicler both greatly magnify the importance of the Levites beyond anything known at any time in history. The regulation in Num. 35 1-8 (P) prescribes that 48 cities should be given to the Levites; in accordance with this passage, Josh. 21 13-42 (also P) gives a list of the 48 cities assigned, 13 being given to the Aaronites and 35 to the Levites. This list is at many points out of harmony with the history, because many of the cities were not occupied by the Hebrews until late and then clearly not possessed by the Levites. It is doubtful, in fact, whether there ever were any purely Levitical cities. It is doubtful, also, whether the Levites ever had the tithe, which was assigned to them by P and the Chronicler, Num. 18 21-32; Neh. 10 37-39. It was certainly given directly to the priests in the later usage; Josephus says it belonged to them, with no suggestion that it had ever been the possession of the Levites, *Ant.*, xx, viii, 8; ix, 2; *Vita*, 12, 15. The watch

service in the temple, the work of the porters, which belonged to the Levites according to P and the Chronicler, was only partially theirs according to the Mishna, the three stations in the inner court being occupied by priests (Baudissin, *Hastings' Dict. of the Bible*, vol. IV, p. 94). The service of consecration of the Levites, Num. 8 5-22, has no place in the history and is evidently purely imaginary. The statement of the Chronicler, Neh. 8 7-9, that the Levites were teachers of the law, a duty elsewhere belonging to the priests, is surely unhistorical. The further statement of the Chronicler, 1 Chron. 15 27; 2 Chron. 5 12, that the Levites and singers wore the priestly linen robe is evidently imaginary. The position of the Levites at the close of the Old Testament period was utterly insignificant, they are mentioned but three times in the New Testament (*Enc. Bib.*, col. 2774).

In view of all that has been said it seems evident that the Levites as a class distinct from the priests and subordinate to them is purely an artificial creation, devised by P and adopted by the Chronicler. Views approximating to this position have been expressed by others, but with some differences. The general situation seems to be as follows. Before the exile the subordinate work of the temple was performed by slaves, known by the descriptive term *Nethinim*, divided, according to their work, into two classes, singers and porters, the former being superior to the latter. The general situation after the exile was the same as before. These temple slaves, however, certainly after the exile and probably before, were circumcised, according to the usual treatment of slaves among the Hebrews. P, for reasons which will be discussed later, wishes to give these attendants a higher status and calls them Levites. The Chronicler accepts the phraseology of P but keeps also the old classification. The result is that the Chronicler gives a jumble, which seems to be due chiefly to his attempt to combine the theory of P with the older facts. Ultimately the phraseology of P was adopted, as shown by the Talmud and the New Testament, although only slightly within the Old Testament itself. Levites became thus the comprehensive term, with singers and porters as the divisions.

The term *Nethinim* practically disappeared from use, being found in the Talmud but having no meaning there.

There may be several reasons why P used the term *Levites* and put such great emphasis upon the importance of those designated by this term. Hereditary slaves tend in antiquity to become under some circumstances a favored class, and the actual status of these attendants as slaves may have been largely ignored in course of time, especially during and after the exile. It is quite possible that some of them claimed Levitical descent. Probably the principal reason, however, was a desire to glorify the cult. The imaginary tabernacle, of such magnificence, was prompted by this reason, its supposed existence provided the authority of great antiquity and great splendor for the cult. The tabernacle, according to the picture of P, required an elaborate personnel; temple slaves were, therefore, quite inadequate, so the Levites were created for the purpose. The author of P doubtless considered it out of accord with the dignity of the cult that the ministers in the temple should be foreigners and slaves. All magnifying of the importance of the Levites enhanced the splendor of the whole cult. This is sufficient, then, to account not only for the use of the term *Levites*, but also for the exaggerated representations of their importance.

The second question we have proposed for consideration is a related one: What is the connection between the Zadokites and the Aaronites. I am aware that there have been many discussions of this subject, some quite recently, which cannot be specifically noticed for reasons of space; the conclusions here reached differ materially, I think, from any previously stated.

The well-known fact has already been noted that while in the early history of the Hebrews any one could be a priest, later this was limited to the tribe of Levi. Then came the time when all Levites were priests. The most powerful body of priests, however, from the time of Solomon, consisted of Zadokites, the Jerusalem priests who called themselves descendants of Zadok whom Solomon established as the principal priest in Jerusalem. The Zadokites continued in charge of

the temple at Jerusalem until the exile. In P, however, the true priests are known not as Zadokites but as Aaronites. The Chronicler, also, uses the term Aaronites at times for the priests, and in his account of the return from the exile mentions one returning priest, Daniel, a descendant of Aaron through Ithamar, thus not a descendant of Zadok, Ezra 82, probably also Neh. 10 6. The Chronicler gives the descendants of Ithamar eight courses along with sixteen for the descendants of Eleazar, 1 Chron. 24 3-5, these being assigned to the time of David.

What has already been noted concerning the unhistorical character of the statements of P and the Chronicler concerning priestly matters makes it probable that their representation at this point also is unhistorical, a conclusion which is confirmed by the available data. All available evidence indicates that the phraseology of P and the Chronicler did not come into common use; the priests were not ordinarily called Aaronites but Zadokites, after the exile as well as before. That this was the case in the late postexilic period is generally recognized. The Sadducees, originally a priestly party, derived their name from Zadok the priest, according to the generally accepted view; this is a testimony to the designation of the priests as Zadokites in the Maccabean period. Ben Sirach testifies to the same situation, in 51 12 (9) in the Hebrew text, where it is said: "Give thanks to him who chose the sons of Zadok for priests". This testifies to the thought of that general time, whether this particular statement is genuine or not, a point somewhat in doubt. The only descriptive term for the priests in ch. 40-48 of Ezekiel is Zadokites. The common assumption that the term Aaronites replaced the term Zadokites in popular use during or immediately after the exile, and then was again replaced by Zadokites, is thus seen to be exceedingly improbable.

A limited use of the term Aaronites is found, but without significance as to common use; it shows some slight influence of P and the Chronicler. This use in the Old Testament is limited to three late psalms which speak of the Aaronites as priests, Ps. 115 10, 12; 118 3; 135 19. Ben Sirach also refers to

Aaron as the ancestor of the priests, 45 8-22, with particular mention of the priesthood as descending to his descendants by an everlasting covenant, v. 18. This is immediately followed, however, by praise of Phinehas the reputed ancestor of Zadok, it being said of Phinehas "that he and his seed should have the dignity of the priesthood for ever," v. 24. Ben Sirach, therefore, has only in mind the Zadokites as priests, who are also described as Aaronites.

The explanation that seems most probable in view of the circumstances is this: There was no early association of the priests with Aaron. The writer of P, however, wishes to give an ancient lineage to the priests, both in order to provide a personnel for the tabernacle and to enhance the glory of the cult. In tracing the lineage to Aaron he is probably following a traditional association with Aaron which had gradually come into being. The early association of the priests had apparently been principally with Moses. But as increased emphasis came to be put upon the work of Moses as law-giver, his importance in relation to the priesthood quite naturally diminished. Fairly early traditions indicated that Aaron was the brother of Moses, Ex. 4 14 (probably a revision of J), and that Moses had assigned priestly rights to the sons of Levi, implied in Ex. 32 26-29 (E). It was thus natural that Aaron should be selected as the ancestor needed to supply the ancient lineage.

It seems evident that P had in mind only the Zadokites as priests, the term Aaronites being regarded as identical in meaning with Zadokites, designed to supplement it not to replace it. The term Aaronites also has its place in the thought of P as a convenient means of discrimination between priests and Levites, only the descendants of Aaron being regarded as priests, all other members of the tribe of Levi being Levites. P enumerates four sons of Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar, with the express statement that Nadab and Abihu died without descendants, Num. 34. Ithamar is consecrated as a priest as well as Eleazar, Ex. 28 1. It is noticeable, however, that P gives no descendants of Ithamar while he does of Eleazar, Ex. 7 23, 25, leaving the obvious in-

ference, especially in view of other circumstances to be noted, that he regarded Ithamar also as having died without issue. Eleazar has all the real importance, being associated with Moses, according to P, in various important activities, Num. 26 63; 31 12-54; 27 1-11; 32 2-32, much of the last passage being from JE, but the references to Eleazar from P. In Num. 25 6-13, further, the priesthood was promised by Moses to Phinehas the son of Eleazar and to his seed, thus excluding any possible descendants of Ithamar. The glorification of Eleazar is also clearly evident in Num. 3 32, where he is called "prince of the princes of the Levites". The passages in Psalms and Ben Sirach already quoted are quite in harmony with this idea, that the term Aaronites is equivalent to Zadokites, in fact that seems to be the necessary meaning in Ben Sirach.

The Chronicler, however, misunderstands the statement of P concerning the Aaronites, regarding it as a broader term than Zadokites, so that he includes descendants of Ithamar as well as of Eleazar among the priests. It is possible that the Chronicler's broader use of the term Aaronites is based upon some traditional association of priests with Ithamar in his time. The paucity of the references of the Chronicler to Ithamarites, however, clearly suggests vagueness in the historical basis, the only references being in 1 Chron. 24 3-5 and Ezra 8 2, with which Neh. 10 6 is probably to be associated. The diminishing importance of the Ithamarites as the course of history draws nearer the time of the Chronicler is doubtless of significance. Whereas in the time of David the Chronicler assigns eight out of twenty-four courses of priests to the Ithamarites, 1 Chron. 24 3-5, at the time of the return from the exile he mentions only one Ithamarite, Ezra 8 2. It is not surprising that this usage of the Chronicler makes no impress on the history; the Ithamarites are not mentioned in any actually historical accounts.

Earlier in this discussion I referred to my published view that all of ch. 40-48 of the Book of Ezekiel was written during the Maccabean period, although not all at the same time. Assuming that standpoint, the significance of these chapters in relation to the preceding discussion will now be

considered. The priests in these chapters, when defined, are regularly described as Zadokites; there are here no references to Aaron or Aaronites. The priests are called Zadokites in 43 10; 44 15; 48 11 and 40 45-46. The last passage probably means that all priests are Zadokites; the other possible view, that there were priests not Zadokites, leaves these other priests undefined and is less probable. This passage, 40 45-46, is peculiar in that it recognizes two classes of priests, "the keepers of the charge of the altar", and "the keepers of the charge of the house", the latter class being the non-Zadokite priests, if there are such. The duties of the latter division are those usually assigned to the porters, classed under the Levites. It is significant in this connection to note that the exact phrase here used of the priests, "keepers of the charge of the house", is applied in 44 14 to the Levites who went astray, while a similar phrase, "the ministers of the house", is applied in 45 5 to the Levites generally. The passage 40 45-46 is probably to be assigned to the year 165 B. C. This passage might suggest that the line of separation between the priests and the Levites was not entirely definite, there being those who were called sometimes priests and sometimes Levites, although other passages do not suggest that view.

The most puzzling question in the closing chapters of Ezekiel, however, concerns itself with the identification of the Levites who went astray after their idols, 44 10-14; 48 11. The references might mean that all the Levites went astray. More naturally, however, they would be understood as indicating that not all the Levites were guilty. Thus in the passage which assigns to the Levites a possession equal to that of the priests, 45 5, the Levites are called simply "the ministers of the house", with no suggestion of guilt. Also, in the fullest description of the guilt of the Levites, 44 10-14, they are called "the Levites that went far from me", most naturally a description of only a portion of the Levites.

These words I consider to have been written after the destruction of the Samaritan temple in 130, and I think the Levites meant were the priests of that temple. These priests were at least partly of Levitical descent and doubtless claimed

such descent entirely; their claims on the ground of descent could not be entirely ignored. Their temple worship, however, while ostensibly in the name of Yahweh, was regarded by the Jews as idolatrous. The description of the acts of these guilty Levites is entirely suitable to these priests of the Samaritan temple. They are assigned to the work of the porters, the lower of the two classes into which the Levites were divided. This assignment is thus a compromise; on the one hand, by virtue of their Levitical descent, they are not denied a connection with the temple; on the other hand, by reason of their idolatrous acts, in opposition to the worship of the temple in Jerusalem, they are given the lowest possible temple assignment. The descriptions of the Zadokites in 44 15 as those "that kept the charge of my sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from me", and in 48 11 as those "that have kept my charge, that went not astray when the children of Israel went astray" are apparently in their direct application descriptions of the faithfulness of the Jerusalem priests at the time of the Samaritan schism. Yet it is quite probable that there is also intended an allusion to the religious schism when the kingdom was divided, designed to cast discredit upon the whole religious history of the northern kingdom, quite in the spirit of the Chronicler. It is in favor of this that the primary responsibility for the defection in these two passages and also in 44 10 is not placed upon the Levites but upon the people of Israel. The use of foreigners as attendants in the temple, here forbidden 44 7, 9, while not mentioned in the historical accounts of the Maccabean times, nevertheless would be natural during the disorganized religious conditions which prevailed at various times during that period. It is a practice which might naturally have been introduced by some of the Hellenizing high-priests and have become a prevailing custom.