

How a Kingdom of Priests Became a Kingdom *with* Priests and Levites: A Filial-Corporate Understanding of the Royal Priesthood in Exodus 19:6

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When we examine the priesthood in the Pentateuch, at least four surprising facts emerge: (1) “kingdom of priests” is never used after Exodus 19:6; (2) Leviticus only speaks of “Levites” four times, all in one passage (25:32–33); (3) Aaron is never called the “high priest,” that title is reserved for his sons only after his death (Num 35:25, 28, 32); and (4) “Levitical priesthood,” which Hebrews 7:11 uses, only appears in Deuteronomy (17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9), where the priests and Levites possess different but related roles in service to God, his house, and the nation of Israel.¹

These four observations are surprising because, among conservative pastors and theologians, such fine distinctions are not always appreciated. For instance, when doctrinal confessions speak of Christ as priest, they often focus on his work as mediator and intercessor,² but overlook his priestly role of teaching and guarding.³ Likewise, when the subject of priesthood is considered theologically, Hebrews gets all the attention, not Numbers. As a result, the fulfillment of the Law is rightly perceived in Christ's finished work, but the inner workings of the priesthood are usually ignored.

Adding to the lack of priestly nuance is the fact that the division between priest and Levite has often been associated with Julius Wellhausen and an historical-critical approach to the Pentateuch.⁴ This scholarly community has argued that "P" is a post-exilic priestly source which sought to elevate the priests over the Levites. Accordingly, because conservative scholars have rightly rejected the presuppositions and methods of Wellhausen and his disciples, the division between priests and Levites has not always been well-considered. Conservative Old Testament (OT) scholars and Bible commentators are not unaware of the distinction, but a unified reading of Moses's five books that aims to define the relationship of priests and Levites is not prominent. This relationship between priests and Levites is the aim of this paper, as it explores the way Exodus–Numbers chronicles the change in Israel's status from a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6) to a kingdom *with* priests and Levites.

In Part 1 of this article, I argued God assigned the title "kingdom of priests" to Israel because priesthood was and is a fundamentally filially position. Before Sinai, firstborn sons served as God's priests.⁵ By extension, when Yahweh identified Israel as his firstborn son (Exod 4:22–23) and made a covenant with Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19–24), he identified Israel as his "corporate Adam," bestowing on Israel all the rights and privileges (e.g., sonship, kingdom, priesthood) associated with being made in God's image.⁶ Thus, the Sinai covenant conferred on Israel a status of royal priesthood. However, because Yahweh conditioned Israel's royal priesthood on Israel's covenantal obedience (Exod 19:4–6), when Israel sinned at Sinai (Exod 32) their priesthood changed. Resultantly, Israel had to undergo various "operations" to restrict and reconstruct their priesthood. These additions to the priesthood can be seen in Exodus–Numbers and will be the focus of this article.⁷

Picking up where Part 1 left off, Part 2 of this argument will consider how the corporate role of Israel's priesthood developed in the life of God's people

during the forty years after Sinai. By working through Exodus–Numbers, I will argue that the “Levitical priesthood” that will be described in Deuteronomy is a multi-layered system of mediation that grew over Israel’s tumultuous experience with Yahweh at Sinai and in the wilderness. Put more positively, under the sovereign direction of God, Israel’s priesthood developed over time as a system of priesthood, mediated by priests and Levites who, respectively, served at God’s altar or stood guard at God’s house.

These layers of mediation are not added arbitrarily or all at once. As with the rest of the canon, God’s words always accompany his works. Or in this case, his words respond to the sinful works of Israel. As with the barriers put in place after Adam sinned, so again Exodus 32–Numbers 35 establish a series of barriers, complete with priests and Levites, until the final form of the “Levitical priesthood” is completed. This article will trace the history of this development through nine moments:

1. Yahweh chose Aaron and his sons to serve as priests (Exod 28–29).
2. Moses interceded for Aaron, so that his role of priest could be restored (Exod 32–34).
3. Yahweh replaced firstborn sons with Levites because of Israel’s sin at the golden calf (Exod 32–34).
4. Yahweh instructed the sons of Aaron how to serve at the altar (Leviticus).
5. Yahweh gave the sons of Levi to Aaron to assist his ministry and guard the house of God (Num 1–8).
6. Yahweh denied Levites the chance to serve at the altar (Num 16–18).
7. Aaron atoned for Israel, so that they could still experience God’s blessing (Num 16–18).
8. Phinehas intervened for the Levites, so that the Levites could be restored and the covenant with Levi could be established (Num 25).
9. With the death of Aaron, the high priest is established as the centerpiece of Israel’s cultus and the one whose death could ransom the manslayer(s) (Num 35).

As will be argued, each of these moments depicts another stage in the development of the priesthood. And for purposes of understanding Israel’s relationship with God in the OT and Christ’s high priesthood in the New, it is vital to see how each stage contributes to the whole system. Altogether, the Levitical priesthood is the sum of all these priestly accretions. Yet, it is not

simply the final form of this priesthood we need to see. By paying attention to its stages of development, we will also see how Christ's priesthood fulfills, or in some cases reverses, all of these stages.

In what follows, I will give a theological reading of these passages to show how Israel's kingdom *of* priests became a kingdom *with* priests and Levites. At the end, I will suggest a few ways this reading of the middle books of the Pentateuch help us better understand Christ's high priesthood and the priesthood of all believers.

EXODUS 28–29: AARON AND HIS SONS, THE FIRST PRIESTS

While an argument can be made that priesthood begins with Adam, not Aaron, Exodus is the place priesthood is introduced to the national life of Israel.⁸ In context, God's choice of Aaron as priest comes in Exodus 28, after the covenant with Israel is inaugurated (Exod 19–24) and the designs for the temple are given (Exod 25–27). Though presented sequentially, priesthood, tabernacle, sacrifice, and covenant all stand as one. This cultic unity is important to state from the beginning, because as we watch God add layers of mediation to the Levitical system, it is always one system which depends on every part working properly as God designs.

In this system, Exodus 28 identifies God's choice of Aaron, the brother of Moses (Exod 6:20; 28:1).⁹ As verse 1 states, "Bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar." This verse begins a process whereby God clothes, consecrates, and places Israel's "high priest" in his presence (28:1–30:10). In these chapters, we can observe at least four details about God's chosen priest.

First, Aaron as an individual, not Levi as a tribe, is chosen as priest. In Exodus 28–29 there is no mention of Levi or his tribe, only Aaron. From a knowledge of future texts, we might assume Aaron is "brought near" (*qrb*) because he is a Levite, but nothing in Exodus has designated Levi as a priestly tribe.¹⁰ God explicitly chooses Aaron and his sons, not the tribe of Levi.¹¹ Throughout Exodus 28–29, Aaron and his sons are the focus of the priesthood, and they are always juxtaposed with the sons of Israel.¹²

This distinction is not often appreciated by commentators—especially those who reference the origin of the priesthood in passing.¹³ Eugene H.

Merrill, for instance, commenting on priests and Levites in Deuteronomy 18, writes, “*From the very establishment of the priestly order under Moses it was clear that the tribe of Levi had been set apart for special service to the Lord and that the priests were to be taken from among the Levites.*”¹⁴ Likewise, D. A. Carson observes in his daily devotion on Psalm 110, “Sinai had prescribed a tabernacle and the associated rites, all to be administered by Levites and by high priests drawn from that tribe. The Mosaic Law made it abundantly clear that Levites alone could discharge these priestly functions.”¹⁵ These two retrospective references to Exodus 28–29 illustrate how the order of events in the Pentateuch is often conflated.¹⁶

Commonly, Aaron’s choice as priest is associated with his origin from Levi and God’s choice of that tribe. But such a reading does not pay attention to Moses’s chronology. It reads the choice of Aaron through the later addition of the Levites, instead of seeing how Aaron and his sons were chosen alone. It could be argued that this oversight does not have huge implications, but maintaining this priestly generalization fails to read the text on its own terms *and* it will lead to depreciating how God chooses Christ as high priest and confers priesthood on his new covenant people. Like Aaron, Jesus will be chosen singularly, and to him will be added “new covenant Levites” (cf. Isa 66:20–21). So, the first observation to make in our study of development of the priesthood is the choice of Aaron and his sons—*not the tribe of Levi*—as the priests in Israel.

Second, Aaron’s priesthood continues in his sons. As I argued in Part 1 of this study, priesthood is inextricably linked to sonship. In Aaron and his sons, priesthood will continue to be a family assignment. Though Aaron alone wears the breastplate with the names of the twelve tribes and the turban with the Lord’s name emblazoned on it (Exod 28:6–39), his sons are given attire for “glory and beauty” (vv. 40–41). Just as Aaron is adorned with regal robes (vv. 1–2), so his sons would look like Adam’s sons, equally resplendent in their garments.¹⁷

Exodus 29 turns from the selection and clothing of Aaron and his sons, and begins to explain the process of consecration. Step by step, Aaron is presented with his sons as they are brought to the entrance to the tent of meeting (v. 4), washed (v. 4), clothed (vv. 5–9), and ordained (v. 10). Again, it is Aaron and his sons who are ordained, not the whole tribe of Levi (cf. Lev 8–9). Aaron and his sons lay their hands on the head of the bull (v. 11) and the rams (v. 15); they are smeared with the blood of the other ram (vv. 19–20) and sprinkled

with the blood on the altar, making their garments holy (v. 21). Moreover, the food offering is also shared between Aaron and his sons (vv. 22–25), as is the contribution of the wave offering (vv. 26–28).

All in all, the ordination process sets apart Aaron's family, such that the holy garments of Aaron are designated for one of his sons when he succeeds him (vv. 29–30). This ordination inaugurates more than a pattern for how to ordain a high priest in Israel; it sanctifies a certain clan from the sons of Israel. Aaron and his sons are given a perpetual priesthood (see 28:43; 29:28), such that Aaron will become synonymous with the priesthood (cf. 1 Sam 2:28; Ps 133:1).

Third, Aaron and his sons mediate for the Levites. Chosen to mediate between God and Israel, the priest represents all twelve tribes including Levi. This basic point carries with it an important reality—in Exodus 28 the Levites do not yet enjoy a greater access to God. This is evident in at least two ways.

First, when Aaron is chosen to be priest “from among the sons of Israel” (28:1), he is not a priest in the abstract. He is a priest for a particular people—i.e., the twelve tribes of Israel. His choice *from* among his brothers indicates this, as does the way “sons of Israel” continues to show up in Exodus.¹⁸

Second, the garments Aaron wears lists Levi with his brothers, the sons of Israel. While later lists of names will replace Levi with the two sons of Joseph (see Num 1:1–16, 17–46), the only antecedent list of names is found in Exodus 1:1–7. From the context of Exodus, therefore, which follows the names blessed by Jacob in Genesis 49, it is best to see Levi as one of the tribes etched on the ephod (28:21). If this is true, it follows that when Aaron represented the twelve tribes of Israel, he represented Levi too. Thus, while Aaron and Moses are Levites, it is anachronistic to argue that Levi is a priestly tribe.

Fourth, Exodus 28–29 suggests a simple priestly mediation, where Aaron and his sons are selected to minister to the whole nation. While the rest of the OT describes a system of priests and Levites, before the golden calf incident, the priesthood centers on Aaron and his sons. To approach God, Yahweh has set apart this clan to stand at his altar, but in light of the mention of “priests” assisting Moses in Exodus 19:22, 26, it is better to see the firstborn sons continuing to have a place in assisting Aaron and his sons.

At this early stage, Aaron continues as a model (royal?) priest for a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6).¹⁹ Aaron as a model Israelite priest is the argument John Davies makes, and there is much to commend for his view.²⁰ Truly, Aaron is a model priest, one whose garments reflect the glory of God. Yet as we will

soon discover, his priestly service will be compromised because he failed to protect Israel from sin. Likewise, it is likely the (firstborn) sons of Israel are the ones who enticed him to make a golden calf, thus making more complex God's covenant arrangement with Israel.

EXODUS 32–34: HOW AARON LOST (AND REGAINED) HIS PRIESTHOOD

Exodus 25–40 is the climax of Exodus, where Yahweh gives instructions for making a “type” of heaven on earth (25:9, 40). In Exodus 25–31 Moses records the specifics of the tabernacle, and then he reports how Israel meticulously obeyed this blueprint in Exodus 35–40. Still, what comes in between is most important (ch. 32–34). In this central section, Israel breaks covenant with God, Moses intercedes, God displays his mercy and grace, and the covenant is restored—but only after the Levites step up and slaughter 3,000 of their brethren. Though often overlooked, Israel's sin and the Levites violent act of loyalty will have a huge impact on Israel's priestly status, and we need to consider how the priesthood changes because of the golden calf incident.²¹

First, the priesthood of Aaron is led astray by the people. After he receives the “two tablets of the testimony ... written with the finger of God” (31:18), Moses records how Israel broke their covenant with God. Reminiscent of the fall of Adam, God's people tempt Aaron to sin by asking him to “make us gods who shall go before us” (32:1). Yet, instead of leading the people to worship God truly, the anointed priest complies and fashions a graven image (v. 6).

From clues revealed later in the Pentateuch (e.g., Num 3, 8, 18), Aaron's disobedience came because the people could come near to him. Apparently, no one sought to assist him or guard his ministry. Assuming the firstborn sons were commissioned to assist and help Aaron, they failed in their service. Instead, they permitted or participated with the people in tempting Aaron to make a golden calf. In Numbers, Aaron and his sons would be guarded by their brothers the Levites to protect them from this very thing. But in Exodus 32, these dedicated guardians were not in place.

Second, Moses intercedes for Aaron and the people. In response to this rebellion, Moses functions as a priest over and above Aaron. While Moses never calls himself a priest, Exodus 32–34 shows him pleading for God to have mercy. Four times Moses interceded for the nation, with the result

that God does not abandon his people, but promises ongoing mercy.²² Simultaneously, Moses interceded for Aaron. As Deuteronomy 9:13–21 says, Moses “lay prostrate before the Lord” and “prayed for Aaron,” so that the Lord might spare Aaron and the people.

In this moment of intercession, Moses proves himself the greater priest. His intercession is what made possible “the continuance of the sacrificial priesthood of Aaron.”²³ From the start, therefore, Moses intercession highlights the weakness of Aaron’s priesthood and the likelihood that someone greater than Aaron would be needed to serve as a faithful priest (cf. 1 Sam 2:35).

Third, the response of the Levites qualifies them to be priests. When Moses returned from Mount Sinai and witnessed how the people have broken loose (32:25), he issued a question and a statement: “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me” (v. 26a). Significantly, only the Levites respond: “And all the sons of Levi gathered around him” (v. 26b). Whether due to familial allegiance or from some other impulse, Levi’s willingness to use their swords to defend the honor of the Lord (v. 27) is defined as the reason why God bestowed upon them the privilege of serving the priests in Israel (see vv. 27–29; cf. Deut 33:8–11).²⁴

Unlike Adam who failed his commission to “serve” and “guard” God’s holy place, the Levites prove themselves faithful—at least initially. Siding with God against their brothers, they prove their worth to assist their brothers (cf. Deut 33:9). Accordingly, God conferred on them a blessing to stand and serve in the household of God. Recalling the events of Exodus 32–34 in Deuteronomy 9:13–10:11, Moses later writes, “*At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD to stand before the LORD to minister to him and to bless in his name, to this day*” (10:8). This latter explanation confirms the timing of the Levites appointment (i.e., after the golden calf). It also identifies the Levites ministerial function. God does not invite Levi to serve at the altar; rather, the Levites are set apart to assist their brothers in carrying the ark, protecting the priests, and conveying blessings to the people.²⁵ In this way, the Levites, with swords on their hips, will stand between people and priest to guard the house of God so that their brothers, the sons of Aaron, can fulfill their ministry at God’s altar.

Fourth, the golden calf explains what comes next. If this reading of Exodus

is correct, it helps mediate the scholarly debate between those who argue for a national understanding of Israel's priesthood (i.e., a kingdom of priests) and others who believe Israel is a kingdom with priests.²⁶ In fact, both of these realities are true—at different points in the story. Israel was chosen by God to be a priestly nation, but because of sin that national identity transmuted into something else. The royal and priestly lines were divided into two tribes in Israel (Judah and Levi), a feature solidified through the rest of the Pentateuch.²⁷

At the same time, Israel is never again called a “kingdom of priests” (*mamleket kohanim*). Now, with Aaron's family at the center, Israel is a kingdom with priests. This has led some scholars to define Exodus 19:6 according to the latter history.²⁸ But such a conclusion overlooks the change that took place with the golden calf. Treating the priesthood in Israel as one, unchanging institution from Sinai to Zion would be like reading Genesis without an awareness of the change that took place because of the fall. Analogously, any biblical theology of priesthood that does not pay attention to the impact of the golden calf will miss the mark with respect to what Exodus 19:6 means and how Israel's priesthood developed over time.²⁹ What follows, therefore, is an attempt to lay out the ways Moses adds the Levites to the priesthood of Aaron, so that a priestly system (i.e., the “Levitical priesthood”) results by the time Israel enters the land.

LEVITICUS: A BOOK FOR PRIESTS NOT LEVITES

If Exodus identifies priesthood with Aaron (not Levi), perhaps Leviticus does. On closer inspection, however, Leviticus is also for the priests, not the Levites. As audacious as this may sound, Leviticus is not for or about the Levites. Jacob Milgrom puts it bluntly: “Leviticus, the name of the third book of the Pentateuch, *has nothing to do with Levites*.”³⁰ Rather, as the Hebrew title reminds us, it is a “law for the priests” (*tōrat kōhanim*).

In fact, the whole book is dedicated to teaching priests how to serve at God's altar. Even the structure of Leviticus centers itself on the work of the high priest on the Day of Atonement (ch. 16). Demonstrating this priestly message in the structure of Leviticus, Michael Morales provides a chiasmic structure that organizes Leviticus. Engaging multiple scholars, he provides a literary and geographic framework that puts Leviticus 16 at the center (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: The literary shape of Leviticus³¹

- Lev 1–7 Sacrifices
 - 8–10 Institution of priesthood/inauguration of cultus
 - 11–15 Clean/unclean in daily life
 - 16 Day of Atonement
 - 17–20 Holy/profane in daily life
 - 21–22 Legislation for the priesthood
- Lev 23–27 Festivals / sacred time

Importantly, this chiastic structures fits within the larger chiasm of the Pentateuch, which “follows (and forms) its unifying theme: *YHWH’s opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence*” (Fig. 2).³²

Fig. 2: The priestly center of the Pentateuch³³

- A Genesis
 - B Exodus
 - C Sanctuary Laws (Lev 1–7)
 - D Priestly Laws (Lev 8–10)
 - E Personal Laws (Lev 11–15)
 - F Day of Atonement (Lev 16)
 - E’ Personal Laws (Lev 17–20)
 - D’ Priestly Laws (Lev 21–22)
 - C’ Sanctuary Laws (Lev 23–27)
 - B’ Numbers
- A’ Deuteronomy

By seeing Leviticus in the context of Moses’ five books, it becomes clear the book plays a central role for Moses.³⁴ Similarly, his wide-angle reading of the Pentateuch evidences the priestly nature of Leviticus.³⁵ Yet, such a focus on the priesthood in Leviticus is not truly Levitical, if by Levitical we mean “of or relating to the Levites.”

Lexically, *kōhen* is used 194 times in Leviticus, and it always refers to Aaron and his sons, never to the sons of Levi. For example, Aaron is referenced at the beginning and the end of the instructions pertaining to the sacrifices (1:7, 11; 7:34). He is also identified in Leviticus 13:2 with respect to the laws for evaluating leprosy and again in 21:21, when stipulations for

the wholeness/holiness of Aaron's offspring are given. Likewise, "Aaron's sons the priests" are mentioned explicitly throughout Leviticus (1:5, 8; 2:2; 3:2; 6:29; 7:6; 13:2; 21:1). And in every instance, the implication is clear: "priest" is in reference to one of Aaron's sons.³⁶

In fact, we can see this taught in the opening verses of Leviticus where Aaron the priest is identified (1:7, 11) with his sons (1:5, 8), and thereafter all unidentified "priest(s)" is clearly a reference to Aaron's sons. In Leviticus 4:3, 15, 16 Moses refers to "anointed priests" and in Leviticus 21:10, he speaks of the "priest who is chief among his brothers," but all the while these brothers are sons of Aaron, not Levi. From this consistent use of *kōhēn* in Leviticus, we conclude that Levites are never called priests. Rather, the priests in Leviticus are Aaron and his sons.

This is also seen in Leviticus 8–9, where Moses gives instructions for the ordination of Aaron and his sons. It is further revealed in the way that Nadab and Abihu's unlawful approach to God is met with divine judgment and serves as a warning to future generations of priests (Lev 10). Significantly, instructions for the Day of Atonement begin with a reference to "the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died" (16:1). Throughout the book, the instructions are given to Aaron and his sons.

Throughout Leviticus, there is only one place that mentions the Levites (Lev 25:23–24). With the Promised Land in view, Moses begins to describe the Sabbath year with special attention given to the land (vv. 1–7). Next, instructions for Jubilee are given (vv. 8–22). Speaking specifically about Levites, Moses gives instructions for the pasturelands and the houses of the Levites, but nowhere do these instructions confuse Levites with priests (vv. 32–34). They admit of the fact that Levites will be spread throughout the land (cf. Num 35), but these servants of the Lord are not priests like the sons of Aaron. Instead, they are assistants to their brothers, and guardians of their (Aaron's) priesthood. Still, all of these features need further delineation, details which Numbers will fill in.

NUMBERS: WHERE GOD ADDS THE LEVITES TO THE PRIESTS

From Exodus 19:1–Numbers 10:10 Israel remained at Sinai, but that changed "in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month," when "the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, and the people

of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai” (vv. 11–12). In brief, these verses look back at all God had given Israel at Sinai. The “tabernacle of the testimony” reflects both the portable temple constructed in Exodus 25–40, as well as the system of mediation delineated in Leviticus. The “stages” mentioned in verse 12 reflect the instructions of Numbers 1:1–10:10, which describe how Yahweh wanted Israel to set up camp. The rest of Numbers 10 (vv. 13–36) reveals Israel’s obedience to these instructions, while Numbers 11:1–15 foreshadows the problem that will plague Israel in the wilderness—unbelief that results in grumbling.

From this hinge in Numbers 10:11–12, we can see two phases of priestly development. Prior to Israel’s departure, Israel’s camp is set up and the Levites are given a place in guarding Aaron and his sons (Num 1–8). Then after Israel breaks camp and begins to move towards Canaan, there are two episodes where Israel’s sin requires further “restrictions” on their access to God. Like a holy king might increase the size and strength of his security detail after his people rebel, so Yahweh solidifies the Levites’ place after Korah’s Rebellion (Num 16–18) and Phinehas’s zeal at Baal-Peor (Num 25). Finally, as the book ends, Numbers 35 gives us the first mention of the “high priest” and the impact of his death on Israel. Let us now examine how these various events develop the Levitical priesthood by means of adding Levites to the priests.

Numbers 1–8: The Addition of the Levites

While Numbers 1 begins with a census counting all the sons of Israel, Numbers 1–8 is predominately about the Levites. Space does not allow for a full discussion of their (1) consecration, (2) placement, (3) duties, (4) redemption (of the firstborn) and (5) ordination, but we need to see those five aspects of their burgeoning priesthood.

First, the Levites are set apart from the rest of the tribes. Whereas every other tribe (including Joseph’s two sons—Ephraim and Manasseh) is numbered for war (v. 2), the Levites are exempted. Numbers 1:47–54 explain how Yahweh told Moses to “appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it” (v. 50). Whereas the other sons of Israel must prepare themselves to guard Israel in war, the sons of Levi must prepare themselves to guard God’s dwelling place. Verses 50b–51 read,

They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of it and shall camp around the tabernacle. When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. *And if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.*

Commissioned with lethal force, the Levites are set apart from the other tribes to “keep guard over the tabernacle of the testimony” (v. 53). Thus, in Numbers 1 we see the separation of the Levites from the other tribes for a purpose that centers on service in the tabernacle.

Second, the Levites are positioned around the tabernacle. In Numbers 2–3 Yahweh sets the arrangement of the camp, with three tribes on each side of the tabernacle (2:2–34) and the priests and Levites forming an interior circle around the tabernacle (3:14–39). On three sides, stood three clans of Levi—Gershon to the West (vv. 21–26), Kohath to the South (vv. 27–32), and Merari to the North (vv. 33–37). And directly in front of the courtyard’s entrance stands the sons of Aaron (vv. 38–39). This arrangement will play an important role in understanding Numbers 25, but for now, we should note how the camp is oriented when it is set up. Numbers 2:2 says that all the tribes are to “face the tent of meeting” (Num 2:2). This tabernacle-centered approach highlights the priority of God’s dwelling place in the middle of the camp, but it also reminds the nation that between God and them stands an army of Levites and priests.³⁷

Visually, the placement of the Levites between Israel and Aaron is one of the most helpful ways we can see what the Levites do. Set outside the “tent of meeting” (3:8), the Levites form a layer of priestly protection (Num 3:5–10; cf. 18:3–4). As Numbers 1:53 explains, the Levites are stationed around the tabernacle “so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel” (1:53; cf. 18:5). Likewise Numbers 8:19 will explain the way God gave the “Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons ... that there may be no plague among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary.” In short, the Levites provide a security detail for the house of God, the people of God, and the priests of God.³⁸

Third, the Levites are called to guard Aaron and his sons as they stand guard around the tabernacle. With the golden calf we learned how immediate access to Israel’s priests might corrupt their service. Exodus 32:1 records how the people “gathered themselves together to Aaron” and convinced

him to make a golden idol. As a result, God killed 3,000 Israelites at the hands of the Levites (v. 28) and set them apart for service to the Lord (v. 29; cf. Deut 33:8–11).

Now in Numbers 3 we read the rest of the story. In verses 5–10, the tribe of Levi is “brought near” (*qrb*). The verb in verse 6 is often associated with cultic service, and it is the same word used of the priests in Exodus 28:1 and 29:4. Importantly, the Levites do not have the same cultic responsibility of the priests. Instead, they are called to serve Aaron (v. 6), to keep guard over Aaron and the congregation (v. 7), and to guard all the furnishings of the tabernacle (v. 8). Yet, what is most significant in verses 9–10 is the way they unite the sons of Aaron with the sons of Levi.

To say it differently, the giving of the Levites to Aaron and his sons identifies the relationship between Aaron and the rest of his tribe. The Levites are a class of “consecrated persons” designated to assist the priests in all their ministries.³⁹ Like the firstborn sons of the patriarchs, Aaron now functions as the chosen firstborn (“the priest who is chief among his brothers,” Lev 21:10), who leads his brothers and all the nation. Conversely, Aaron’s brother-Levites are to serve him and assist in all the operations of the tabernacle. In ways that may go back to Ithamar in Exodus 38:21, the Levites appear to derive their priestly status from Aaron’s sons and certainly come to provide assistance in the dwelling place of God.⁴⁰

Fourth, the Levites replace the firstborn sons of Israel by way of redemption. If the paired command “serve and guard” forms a link between Adam (Gen 2:15) and the Levites (Num 3:7–8; 8:25–26; 18:5–6), it makes great sense that they would replace the firstborn sons as the designated priests in Israel, because Adam himself was the firstborn son of God (cf. Luke 3:38).⁴¹ As Part 1 of this article demonstrated, until the covenant at Sinai, firstborn sons served as filial priests. Now, in Numbers 3 the filial priesthood is being replaced by a representative “priesthood” (i.e., the sons of Levi). In context we find at least three evidences for this redemption and replacement.

First, the firstborn sons of Israel have already proven themselves dubious as filial priests. At the golden calf, the firstborn sons (the seventy elders of Israel and other firstborn sons?) should have helped Aaron resist the wayward Israelites, but they did not. While some of their number had seen the Lord (Exod 24:9–11), they failed to serve and guard Aaron when

Moses ascended the mountain.

Second and more explicitly, Yahweh says three times in Numbers 3 that he is taking the Levites *instead* (*tāhāṭ*) of the firstborn sons of Israel (vv. 11–13, 41, 45). Grounding his choice in the events of Passover (vv. 11–13; cf. Exod 12:12–13), Yahweh is now substituting the firstborn sons of Israel with the Levites. Just like at the Passover, the firstborn sons of Israel needed atonement to survive the judgment of God. So again, Yahweh is providing a substitute for the firstborns of Israel; only this time it comes through the personal substitution of the Levites. Thus, instead of sons from every tribe coming to assist the sons of Aaron, as is witnessed in Exodus 24:5 (cf. 19:22, 24), the Levites are now the designated substitutes for the firstborn sons.

Such a substitution, it could be argued, is a logistical improvement for the nation of Israel. Better to have a designated tribe wholly devoted to the protection of the tabernacle than bi-vocational priests serving once a year, but this misses the point. In the context of Numbers 3, the substitution is propitiatory, not pragmatic. The language of “instead” (*tāhāṭ*) identifies the kind of one-for-one substitution taking place. The word is used to describe how God gave Eve another son (Seth) instead of Abel (Gen 4:25); it is the word used in Genesis 22:13 to speak of Abraham killing the lamb “instead” of Isaac; and it is the language repeated in the retributive justice explained in Exodus 21:23–25. In other words, the sons of Levi are not substituting for the firstborn sons for a logistical improvement; they are redeeming the firstborn sons.

Third, the exactness of this redemption can be seen in the number of Levites replacing the number of firstborns. Numbers 3:39 records 22,000 as the total number of Levites; verse 43 records 22,273 firstborn sons. To complete the transaction, verses 44–51 explains how every other firstborn is redeemed by the “redemption price” of five shekels per head, which is the same price as a son aged one month to five years of age (Lev 27:6). All in all, Numbers 3 shows how the sons of Levi have come to replace the firstborn sons of Israel. In this way, we see the moment when Israel as a nation went from a nation *of* priests to a nation *with* priests and Levites. No longer is every firstborn son invited into tabernacle service. Now the Levites had this blessed role of standing in God’s house (cf. Ps 84:10), until a sinless firstborn enters the temple and redeems them (see Luke 2:23).⁴²

Fifth, the Levites are officially ordained as priestly assistants. After the Levites redeemed the firstborn sons and are added to the priests, they remain a central focus in Numbers 4–8. First, in Numbers 4 the duties of the Levites are divided among the Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites. Confirming earlier instructions, Aaron’s sons continue to have primacy over the Levites. For instance, after the Kohathites are given authority to carry the holy vessels of the sanctuary, verse 16 says that Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest shall “oversee the whole tabernacle and all that is in it.” Likewise, the sons of Gershon and Merari are also said to be “under the direction of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest” (vv. 28, 33).

Next, Numbers 5 gives instructions concerning uncleanness (vv. 1–4), sin and confession (vv. 5–10), and a test for adultery (vv. 11–31). Significantly, each of these sections are mediated by a “priest,” not a Levite.⁴³ At this point, the Levites are still not confused with the priests. Instead, the primacy of the priests remains. Numbers 6 continues its focus on the priesthood, as it makes a place for “voluntary priesthood” through the Nazirite vow (vv. 1–21).⁴⁴ With this vow, an Israelite can choose to live like a priest, even though there is no mechanism under the Law for a man to be given a place in a recognized priesthood. Significantly, the priestly focus of this chapter ends with the Aaronic blessing (vv. 22–27), which is a means by which the Lord’s name and blessing was put upon God’s people.

Numbers 7 returns to the Levites, as Yahweh receives the gifts of Israel’s leading men (“chiefs of Israel, heads of their fathers’ houses, who were the chiefs of the tribes,” v. 2) and instructs Moses to give them to the sons of Levi (vv. 4–6). With these gifts, they are equipped to carry the tabernacle. Again, this episode reinforces the relationship between the people and the Levites. Set apart from tabernacle service, the rest of the twelve tribes are now called to provide for the Levites (see Num 18).

Finally, Numbers 8 culminates the consecration of Levites. While the Pentateuch has traced the growing place of the Levites, this chapter will formalize their status as assistants to Aaron and his sons. Just as Israel was ordained as a priestly nation in Exodus 24 and the sons of Aaron were ordained in Leviticus 8–9, now the Levites are ordained to serve as assistants to the sons of Aaron.

Verses 5–13 describe the process. First, the Levites were set apart (v. 6), cleansed (vv. 6–7), and shaved (v. 7). Then, like the sons of Aaron, sin

offerings and burnt offerings were made for them (v. 8, 12), while the people looked on (vv. 9–10) and even placed hands on them (v. 10). In this way, the Levites were set apart as assistants to the priests, serving alongside their brothers. Significantly, the themes of firstborn and redemption are central to explaining why the Levites were set apart for God. As verses 14–19 explain,

“Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine. And after that the Levites shall go in to serve at the tent of meeting, when you have cleansed them and offered them as a wave offering. For they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel. Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself. For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself, and I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary.”

From this explanation, we learn how the Levites take the place of the firstborn. Whereas, the firstborn sons of Israel once served God at any number of primitive altars (Gen 12:7,8; 13:4, 18), now the worship of God has been centered on the tabernacle which houses the ark of the covenant. And in that house, the tribe of Levi is called to assist Aaron and his sons “instead” (*tāḥāt*) of the firstborns.

Numbers 3–8, not Exodus–Leviticus, is the place, therefore, where the Levites are brought near to the Lord to serve in his tent. Yet, it is also the place where the sons of Israel are finally cut off from the house of the Lord. While Exodus 19:6 invited Israel to be a kingdom *of* priests, now firstborn sons can only watch as the Levites draw near in their place. In the OT, Israel would always be God’s only covenant people. As Paul declares in Romans 9:4, they have “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises,” yet because of their sin at Sinai, the individual Israelites lost their chance to be a kingdom *of* priests. Instead, they became a kingdom *with* priests and Levites.

Looking back on the OT, it is easy to conflate the priests and the Levites into one “Levitical priesthood,” but this misses how the system worked. As Numbers 1–8 reveals, God gave the Levites to Aaron and his sons in order to serve in God’s household and guard God’s priests. This idea will be further developed in the rest of Numbers and will be an important framework for understanding the relationship between Christ and his new covenant Levites.

Numbers 16–18: The Levites are Restricted from Acting Like Priests

From Numbers 11–15, grumbling permeated the people (e.g., 14:2, 27 [2x], 29, 36; 16:11, 41; 17:5). It also infected Aaron and Miriam (12:1–16). Not surprisingly, the Levites, who were stationed between people and priest, joined in the rebellion. As with Adam’s fall (Gen 3) and Aaron’s failure at the golden calf (Exod 32), so now the Levites display their sinfulness. While chosen by God to possess a special place in his tabernacle, they too experience a “fall.”⁴⁵

To begin with, Numbers 16 recounts the events of the Levites rebellion; Numbers 17–18 unfold God’s response, which will solidify the place of the Levites in Israel’s institution of mediation. At the same time, we learn in this passage how Exodus 19:6 no longer applies to the whole nation of Israel. In fact, it is a misunderstanding of that conditional promise that supports the rebellion of Korah and the chiefs of Israel. Yet, because sin has changed conditions, things are no longer as they were and the application of Exodus 19:6 no longer applies directly to Israel without further mediation.

First, instead of guarding Aaron’s priesthood the Levites partner with the accusers. Numbers 16 begins with “250 chiefs of the congregation” rising up to accuse Moses and Aaron (v. 2–3). The identity of these men is uncertain, but it most likely they are composed of Levites and non-Levites.⁴⁶ In this context, instead of assisting Aaron and Moses, we find a Levite (Korah), partnering with Dathan and Abiram to usurp the authority and priesthood of Moses and Aaron.⁴⁷

The problem with their approach is more than a presumptuous spirit; it is the way this Kohathite (see Exod 6:16, 18, 21), partnered with the people instead of protecting Aaron and his priesthood. In Numbers 3:5–10 and 8:19, Yahweh stated the Levites were given to Aaron to guard him, his priesthood, and the tabernacle. Moreover, they were to protect the people from the wrath of God. Yet, now instead of protecting Aaron and the people, Korah is the one leading the charge, leading to God’s “plague”

(*něgěp*) on God's people (16:46, 47).

As the chapter details, Yahweh comes to the defense of his priests—Moses and Aaron. First, when the accusers and the accused gather the next day (v. 19), God opened the earth to swallow Korah and the sons of Reuben (vv. 25–33). Next, God's fire consumed the 250 men who were holding incense-burning censers (vv. 34–35). And finally, on the next day as the people grumbled against Moses and Aaron (v. 41), the plague of God began to fall upon the people (vv. 46–47). In response, Aaron “stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped” (v. 48). In this harrowing episode, God stood beside his chosen priest. But it is important to see that the whole debacle began when Korah sided with the firstborns of Israel (i.e., the sons of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn) and failed to fulfill his Levitical role.

Second, the accusation against Aaron is based upon a misreading of Exodus 19:6. Going back to Numbers 16:3, we can hear echoes of Exodus 19:6 in the accusers' words. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram inveigh against Aaron and Moses: “You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?” The connection with Exodus 19:6 is seen in the words, “For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them.” However, “those words were based on the faithful obedience to the covenant stipulations and not an unconditional promise.”⁴⁸ Hence, when Israel sinned against God at the golden calf, they lost their priestly status.

Now this congregational attempt to regain their priestly status was an overreach, because God's promise had been vacated by sin. Just as Israel attempted to enter the Promised Land, after God consigned them to the wilderness for their disobedience and died as a result (cf. Num 14:39–45); so now these “would-be priests” sought to exalt themselves to the position given to Aaron and Moses alone. As Numbers 16 details, the tribe of the firstborn, Reuben, had conspired to reject God's institution of mediation. And instead of being corrected by Korah, this Levite became a co-conspirator. In fact, we know the priesthood was their aim, because of what Moses says to the Levites:

“You have gone too far, sons of Levi!” ... “Hear now, you sons of Levi: is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of

Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the LORD and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? *And would you seek the priesthood also?* (vv. 7b–10)

This verse, more than any other, shows the Levites were not the central priests in Israel. It shows they have been given a unique place in the service of the tabernacle, but it was not the same as Aaron and his sons. They were invited by God to stand between priest and people, but they were not permitted to encroach any further towards God's holy place.⁴⁹

Third, Aaron's priesthood is confirmed as God's chosen mediator. In Numbers 17, after Aaron had intervened and "made atonement for the people" (16:47), Yahweh (again) separated Aaron from the rest tribes of Israel. In verse 2, Moses is instructed to collect staffs from each tribe, "one for each fathers' house, from all their chiefs according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs." Importantly, the twelve staffs go back to the original twelve sons of Israel (Gen 49; Exod 1), not the list of tribes presented in Numbers 3, when the Levites were replaced by a second son of Joseph. Accordingly, it is as if Yahweh is teaching his people again *who* will represent them. Not all tribes are priests, rather only one tribe is associated with priesthood.

Importantly, this chapter balances the last. Whereas Numbers 16 identifies the difference between the sons of Aaron from the sons of Levi, this chapter joins them together. Only now, it will become evident who the head of the Levites is. When Yahweh says, "write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi" he is placing Aaron as the head (or elder brother) of the tribe. Lest any Levite think that he is on the same level as the Aaronic priest, this episode reinforces the central role of Aaron and his sons.

Following the events of Numbers 17, these twelve staffs are placed before the Lord in the tent of meeting (v. 4) and overnight only one of them buds—the staff with Aaron's name on it (v. 8). Accordingly, Aaron as the head of the Levites is once more confirmed. And the reason for this placement is explicated in verse 10: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumblings against me, lest they die.'" With sobering clarity, the staff of Aaron was placed in the holy of holies to bear perpetual witness to the one God chose as priest. In response, the congregation

expresses great dismay. Recognizing their inability draw near to God, they cry: “Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, shall die. Are we all to perish?” (vv. 12–13). Rightly assessing their situation, the sons of Israel see that they are no longer a kingdom of priests in their own right. Instead, they are now a nation entirely dependent on priests and Levites, and this most recent episode has only added another layer of legal stipulations, further explicating the roles of priests and Levites in Israel.

Fourth, the Levitical priesthood is finally set in place. In Numbers 18 instructions are laid out for Aaron, his sons, and their “brothers, also, the tribe of Levi” (vv. 1–2). While the sons of Aaron continue to have the responsibility for sin-bearing in Israel (v. 1, 7), the Levites are called to join them in the ministry (vv. 2–6). In many ways these seven verses (vv. 1–7) summarize the sacrificial system of Leviticus and spatial arrangement of Numbers 1–8. The Levites will guard the sons of Aaron (vv. 3–4), while the sons of Aaron “shall keep guard over the sanctuary and over the altar, *that there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel*” (v. 5). Together, their combined mediation will protect the people of Israel and enable Israel to dwell in God’s presence.

Again, one can read Numbers 18 (esp. vv. 8–32) as a logistical necessity for a people moving into the Promised Land, but this would miss the way that these institutions developed through the historical events of Israel. Repeatedly, these stipulations are explained in connection with historical events: the Passover (Exod 12), the loyalty of the Levites (Exod 32), the redemption of the firstborn (Num 3), and the rebellion led by Korah (Num 16) all give shape to the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and his people. Put differently, to understand fully the meaning of Exodus 19:6 requires a holistic reading of the Pentateuch and an appreciation for the development of the priesthood in Israel, which requires two more stops in Numbers.

Numbers 25: The Redemption of the Levites

After another layer of mediation is added in Numbers 18, there continue to be important instructions and events related to the priests and Levites. The need for and preparation of holy water (Num 19), the sin of Moses (20:1–13), the death of Aaron (20:22–29), the grumbling of Israel that led to creation of the bronze serpent (21:4–9), and instructions for offerings (Num 28–29) all play a role in forming Israel as a covenant people. Still, the

event with the most lasting significance for the priesthood occurs when God makes a “covenant with Levi” in Numbers 25.

In due course, Balak failed to curse Israel with the prophet Balaam (Num 22–24), but “the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab” (25:1). Provoking the anger of the Lord (v. 3), Yahweh instructed Moses to put to death the evildoers (vv. 4–5), but the central action of the chapter comes when an Israelite man “came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting” (v. 6). The actions of the man and the location of his sin are important for multiple reasons.

First, the verbs used to describe his actions (“came and brought”) are those used to describe the actions of a worshiper coming near the tent of meeting bringing a sacrifice.⁵⁰ Second, the proximity to the tent of meeting (“in the sight of Moses”), indicates the way in which this man is bringing sin to the center of the camp, where God’s Spirit dwells. Instead of bringing a sin offering, he brings his sin for all to see. Such blatant rebellion invites the judgment of God, yet instead of the Levites who were the first line of defense against such sin approaching God’s holy place, it is Phinehas, “the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest” (v. 7) who acts.

Third, stressing the failure of the Levites to guard the people and holy dwelling of God, we see that a “plague” broke out in the camp, just as God said would happen if the Levites failed in their duty. Number 8:19 explains,

And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no *plague* (*něgěp*) among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary.

If a plague has befallen Israel in Numbers 25:8, Numbers 8:19 indicates the Levites are to blame. Moreover, if we remember the concentric circles of camp (Num 2–3) and that each layer has greater holiness,⁵¹ then when Number 25:6 says Moses and the priests were able to see an Israelite man bringing his Moabite woman into the camp, it means that impurity of the greatest degree has drawn near to God.

In response, Phinehas steps forward from his priestly position at God’s altar to execute justice where the Levites failed. Keeping Exodus 29:37 and

30:29 in mind, which state that “whatever touches the altar shall become holy,” Phinehas’s actions result in the holiness of God breaking out into the camp, by means of this faithful priest (Num 25:7–8).⁵² Numbers 25:10–13 explains the effect of this priestly service:

And the LORD said to Moses, “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.’”

Because of Phinehas’ priestly action, he and his posterity are rewarded with a “covenant of perpetual priesthood” (v. 13). But we should remember that Aaron and his sons had already possessed a perpetual priesthood through their anointing in Exodus 40:15. So this covenant is not just for them. Rather, as Malachi calls it a “covenant with Levi,” we learn this covenant is for the whole tribe. A son of Aaron secures it, but it is applied to all the sons of Levi, as this priest “redeems” the Levites who had failed to keep their sacred duty. On this point, Roy Gane makes an insightful connection between the covenant with Levi and the covenant with David, one that may provide a key insight into how the Sinai covenant added two more covenants—one priestly, one kingly. He states,

God’s covenant of eternal priesthood for Phinehas is similar to the later divine covenant of dynastic monarchy for David (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89). Both covenants promise loyal individuals that they and their descendants will fill existing institutional positions of national leadership within the framework of the covenant established with Israel at Sinai.⁵³

Though it goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is remarkable that Numbers 25 and 2 Samuel 7 (cf. 1 Chron 16) present two covenants that carry forward the missing element of the Sinai Covenant. While Israel remains God’s “treasured possession” (*segullâ*) and holy people (see Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:19; 28:9), they are no longer “a kingdom of priests.” Instead, they will become a kingdom *with* priests, where each institution has a specific covenant.

In the flow of covenantal history, it will not be until the new covenant

that these two covenants find their terminus in Christ. As Gane concludes, “According to the New Testament, Christ occupies both positions within the ‘new covenant’: He is the eternal High Priest (but after the order of Melchizedek, Heb. 7) and the Davidic King (e.g., Mark 11:19 Luke 1:32–33; Rev. 19:11–16; 22:16).”⁵⁴ While many biblical theologies move from Israel to David with little attention to Levi, it seems the covenant with Levi should be given a greater hearing to better understand (1) what became of the royal priestly promise in Exodus 19:6 and (2) how the new covenant fulfills the old covenant as Christ reunites the offices of priest and king (cf. Heb 5:5–6).

Still, to understand the logic of this priestly covenant requires that we see how the rest of the OT understands Numbers 25. And this leads us to a brief consideration of Malachi, the only place where the “covenant with Levi” (v. 4) is named. Importantly, this is also the place (3:1–4), where God promises to purify his Levites, suggesting that what happened in Numbers 25 is typological of what Christ will do as he establishes a new covenant that fulfills the covenants with Israel, Levi, and David.⁵⁵

Standing on multiple linguistic connections with Numbers 25,⁵⁶ Malachi goes on to tell of a day when God will purify the Levites (3:1–4). Just as Phinehas purified the Levites and God made a covenant to establish them as servants in Israel, so these events foreshadow the later and greater fulfillment of Christ and his Church. For, just as Phinehas leaves the altar to purify the people in the camp, so Jesus as a better priest makes his disciples clean when he begins to heal his people and pronounce forgiveness outside the temple.⁵⁷

Returning to the textual horizon of Numbers, we see the covenant with Levi is granted “because he [Phinehas] was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel” (Num 25:13). Notice the conditionality of this statement. Just as Abraham was at first granted a land, a people, and God’s blessed presence in God’s covenant with him (see Gen 12:1–3; 15:1–7; 17:1–6), Abraham’s priestly actions later secured God’s covenant with him *because* he obeyed God’s voice (see Gen 22:18; 26:5).⁵⁸ Likewise, Israel as a nation was granted the right to be a kingdom of priests, but because they failed to obey God’s voice after promising to do so in Exodus 19:8 (cf. 24:3, 7) they could not continue to be a nation of priests. Rather, as episodes in Exodus and Numbers have demonstrated, the priests in Israel are the ones who obey God’s voice.

In the end, the events of Numbers 25 conjoin without confusing the roles of priest and Levite. While the Levites should have dispatched of Zimri and

Cozbi as they approached the tent of meeting, they did not. Rather, it was the grandson of Aaron who did. In this way, he took the place of the Levites to fulfill their role, and in the process he secured a covenant that redeemed his brothers and made an ongoing union between priest and Levite. Indeed, because this “covenant with Levi” is the definitive event in Numbers for establishing the “Levitical priesthood,” we are almost in a position to conclude. But first, we need to consider one more passage—Numbers 35 and the death of the “high priest.”

Numbers 35: The Substitutionary Death of the High Priest

Until now Moses has not used the term “high priest” (*kōhēn gādōl*). Leviticus 21:10 spoke of “the priest who is chief among his brothers [*hakōhēn hagādōl mevehāy*], on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments,” a clear reference to the high priest. However, until Aaron died (Num 20:22–29) and God established the covenant with Levi (Num 25:1–13), “high priest” is not used.⁵⁹ Still, it is less the title that demands attention and more the effect of the high priest’s death in Israel.

In Numbers 35 Moses describes two kinds of cities—cities for Levites (vv. 1–8) and cities for manslayers (vv. 9–34). The former place priestly assistants throughout the land so that “the presence and holiness of God ... [would be] distributed over the entire land.”⁶⁰ Functionally, the Levites would teach the people the Law, so that they would be ready to worship in Jerusalem (cf. Deut 33:10a; 2 Chron 35:3; Neh 8:7, 9).⁶¹ In total, there were forty-eight cities given to the Levites, but six were designated as “cities of refuge” (v. 6). It is the stipulations associated with these six cities that relate to the high priest’s death.

In explaining the laws concerning who is qualified for safety in the cities of refuge (vv. 9–34), Moses says the manslayer must remain in the city until the death of the high priest (v. 28). Like the Passover, where the firstborn took shelter behind the blood the lamb, the manslayer was required to take refuge in the designated city until the death of the high priest. In this context, verse 31 says no ransom shall be given for the murderer, but also “you shall accept no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the high priest.”

In these words, Moses makes an important distinction between the murderer and manslayer, even as he affirms that the shedding of any innocent blood pollutes the land (vv. 33–34). Therefore, the manslayer could not roam freely in the land until his uncleanness was covered. Still, no animal sacrifice could ransom

him either. In the logic of the passage, it is only the death of the high priest that could “ransom” him.⁶² As Numbers 35 explains, only “*after the death of the high priest*” could the manslayer “return to the land of his possession” (v. 28).⁶³

In the context of Numbers this language of “possession” goes back to a verse like Numbers 32:32, which reads, “We will pass over armed before the LORD into the land of Canaan, and the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us beyond the Jordan.” While the man took shelter in the city of refuge, he could not enjoy “the possession of his inheritance”—an inheritance associated with the system of primogeniture in Israel. Accordingly, as Numbers concludes, it puts in place a substitutionary atonement, one that is even more costly than the Passover. While the Passover substituted an unblemished lamb in the place of firstborns, the law of Numbers 35 substitutes an unblemished man (i.e., high priest) for the manslayer.

Just as the Passover lamb ransomed the firstborn sons of Israel (i.e., the ones who would be given the inheritance, see Deut 21:15–17), so this provision for shelter and release at the point of the high priest’s death made a provision for the sons of Israel to return to their inheritance (i.e., the land) after the death of the high priest. In this way, the death of the high priest serves a role as significant as that of the Passover lamb, releasing the man from his sentence to death and enabling him to return the land of the living.

While only a faint allusion, Hebrews may pick up this high priestly substitution with its covenantal effects. Contrasting the priestly order of Melchizedek with the priestly order of Aaron, Hebrews 7:11–12 read,

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

Importantly, this passage completes the argument being made in this article, even as it sets us up to investigate the “Levitical priesthood” in Deuteronomy (a query for another day). In Hebrews 7, the Levitical priesthood is defined as “the order of Aaron,” not the order of Levi. This reiterates the point that the whole priestly system ran from Aaron down to the Levites and then the people (cf. Psalm 133). Yet, because of Aaron’s inherit weakness, this priestly order would always require renewal.

In the Pentateuch itself, the death of Aaron meant that the priesthood would be renewed every few years. The instructions for such priestly consecration are given in Leviticus 8–9; then Numbers 35 tells us to expect the ongoing replacement of priests, because death prevented them from continuing in office (Heb 7:23). Nevertheless, such a death of the high priest was not ineffectual, as it effectively released any manslayer (even multiple manslaughterers) from captivity to enjoy the possession of his inheritance once again. Truly, this death of the high priest anticipated a greater substitution through the death *and resurrection* of a greater high priest. Thus, the point Hebrews picks up the inner logic of the Levitical priesthood, where Jesus as the firstborn from the dead is not only a greater sacrifice but also a greater high priest who dies to ransom his people. His death not only paid the penalty under the new law, but as Hebrews 8–9 indicate, it established a new covenant—for as Numbers 35 teaches the death of a high priest resets the laws in the land.

PUTTING THE PRIESTS AND LEVITES TOGETHER: APPROACHING DEUTERONOMY AND NEW COVENANT PRIESTHOOD

All in all, when we put Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers together, we learn there is more to the Levitical priesthood than we may have first realized. In fact, to speak in general terms about Levi as the priestly tribe is like saying the Bible is a book about God—end of story. Of course, Levi is Israel's priestly tribe (cf. Num 17), but this generalization misses *how* they became a priestly tribe. And in missing this point, we miss *how* Christ became a high priest with his own kingdom of priests.

By looking more carefully at the chronology of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers we are better equipped to understand what Moses said in Exodus 19:6 *and* what he would say about the “Levitical priesthood” in Deuteronomy. As stated at the onset, Moses only used this term (“Levitical priesthood”) in his final book (Deut 17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9). From what we have seen here, it is plausible that this language is shorthand for the whole system of “the priests the Levites” (*hakōhanîm haleviyyim*). An inquiry still remains to consider how Moses applies these terms in Deuteronomy, but from Exodus–Numbers we learn origins of and relations between the household of Aaron and the household of Levi (cf. Ps 135:19–20).

In this article, I have sought to trace the construction of this system of

mediation in the books leading up to Deuteronomy. I have shown how Israel as kingdom *of* priests became a kingdom *with* priests and Levites, through a series of sinful steps and divine responses. In this way, I have intended to advance the conversation about priesthood in the Pentateuch, even though consideration of Deuteronomy remains.

Nevertheless, we find in the middle books of the Pentateuch a significant history—a schematic, perhaps?—of how God makes a kingdom of priests. Whereas Israel, as God’s firstborn, was originally intended to be a kingdom of priests, it failed to arrive at that goal. That being the case, the royal priestly goal of God’s people remained, as did the steps to priesthood.

Thus, in the rest of the OT, the covenant of Sinai was advanced by two covenants—one priestly, one royal. Likewise, when God made a new covenant through Jesus Christ, the “royal priesthood” returned.⁶⁴ As 1 Peter 2:5, 9 indicates, the Church—composed of Jews and Gentiles—is God’s kingdom of priests (cf. Exod 19:6). While Israel remained God’s “treasured possession” and “people holy to the Lord” (Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:19; 28:9), under the old covenant, priesthood was isolated to the tribe of Levi.⁶⁵ The firstborn sons lost their priestly standing at the golden calf, with the tribe of Levi taking their place. Under the new covenant, however, the priesthood of Christ has made a way for all disciples to be heirs of the kingdom, children of God, and priests in his temple.

What Israel failed to attain because of their sinfulness and Aaron’s weakness, the new covenant people of God have attained because of Christ’s sinlessness and strength. As the Prophets promised (e.g., Jer 33:14–25; Mal 3:1–4), the Lord has reestablished the Levitical priesthood and purified the Levites. Only he has not done that by continuing the covenant to Levi.⁶⁶ As this article has argued, Levi was never intended to be the priestly tribe; it was always the placeholder for the firstborn sons. Therefore, at the right time, God sent his Son to redeem a people from every nation and make them priests and Levites in his kingdom, just as Isaiah 66:20–21 promised.

Still—and this is where the chronology of the priesthood in the Pentateuch really matters!—God created this new covenant priesthood *in the same order*. First, he chose Christ to be his high priest, like he chose Aaron. Then, through his perfect obedience, Jesus proved his sonship, and his qualifications to be priest. By his death, he redeemed people seeking shelter for their bloodshed and he established a new legal situation (a new covenant) for the world, just

like the Numbers 35 describes. Moreover, in restoring the firstborns to their rightful position of royal priesthood, Jesus's death both purified the Levites (Mal 3:1–4) and added new priests and Levites to the fold. As Ephesians 4:8 picks up the language of Psalm 68:18, which in turn picks up the language from Numbers, we see how God “gave” men and women as gifts to Christ.⁶⁷ The effect of these gifts makes Jesus a high priest like Aaron, who received the gift of Levites in Numbers 8 and 18. In all these ways, the old covenant priesthood is a shadow of Christ and his priesthood. But more, the specific order of operations that occurred in Exodus–Numbers also anticipates the outworking of Christ's death and resurrection and the establishment of the Church as God's kingdom of priests.

For this reason, we who prize the finished work of Christ and the ongoing intercession of his high priesthood must continue to see how God established the first priesthood, so that we might better understand the establishment of the second. Truly, the details of the priesthood are not simply fodder for the likes of Julius Wellhausen or Roman Catholic bishops. Rather, Moses's details about the priesthood help us to understand our own salvation and how Jesus Christ finished work has made the church a kingdom of priests. Indeed, studying the priestly history of Israel is studying the Church's pre-history, for in Christ we are a kingdom of priests, the fulfillment of Exodus 19:6 and the rest of the Pentateuch.

¹ Most modern English versions translate *hakōhanim haleviyyim* as “Levitical priests” (ESV, NIV, NASB, CSB, etc.). The KJV translates it more literally, “the priests the Levites,” indicating, more woodenly, the construction of the original Hebrew. This article will not tackle the translation of this phrase or grammatical construction which permits “Levitical priesthood.” For such a discussion, see the older but thorough work of Samuel Ives Curtiss, *The Levitical Priests: A Contribution of the Pentateuch* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1877). This article reads the Pentateuch as a whole, giving a (chrono)logical explanation of the system of mediation that includes priests and Levites. Another article is required to consider the best way to translate Deut 17:9, etc., and how these verses might relate to the content of Exodus–Numbers. This article will focus on Exodus to Numbers.

² See e.g., Belgic Confession, Art. XXI; Westminster Confession of Faith Chap. XIII, Second London Baptist Confession VIII.1, 9, 10.

³ The article best outlining the role of an OT priest maybe that of Peter Leithart, “Attendants of Yahweh's House: Priesthood in the Old Testament,” *JSOT* 85 (1999): 3–24. T. J. Betts, *Ezekiel the Priest: A Custodian of Tōrā* (Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 74; New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 17–45, offers perspective on the priestly role of teaching. Historically, Bryan Stewart, *Priests of My People: Levitical Paradigms for Early Christian Ministers* (Patristic Studies, vol. 11; New York: Peter Lang, 2015), provides an illuminating look at how Levitical typology, especially with respect to teaching, guarding, and general administration, informed the role of “priests” in the early church.

⁴ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (trans. J. S. Black and A. Menzies; Edinburgh: Adam and

- Charles Black, 1885). More recently, we find other scholars following and adjusting the priestly vision of Wellhausen. Deborah W. Rooke, *Zadok's Heirs: The Role and Development of the High Priesthood in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).
- ⁵ David Schrock, "Restoring the Image of God: A Corporate Filial Approach to the 'Royal Priesthood' in Exodus 19:6" *SBJT* 22.2 (2018): 25–60. Even at Sinai, there is evidence of priestly service offered by firstborn sons. Anticipating part of the argument of this article, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., concludes, "It must be a reference to the 'firstborn' of every family who were dedicated and consecrated to God (Exod. 13:2). Only later was the tribe of Levi substituted for each firstborn male (Num. 3:45)." *Exodus*, in vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelain; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 49.
- ⁶ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (NSBT 17; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 120–21.
- ⁷ The goal of this article is to watch the development of the priesthood, not its final form, yet it will not consider the book of Deuteronomy. A full investigation of priests and Levites in Deuteronomy must await another article.
- ⁸ This is the place where Andrew Malone begins his study of the priesthood in *God's Mediators: A Biblical Theology of Priesthood* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), ch. 2.
- ⁹ Though we might overlook the fact that divine choice is a qualification for priestly service, the author of Hebrews does not. Hebrews 5 states, "For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins ... And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was" (vv. 1, 4)
- ¹⁰ As I argue in *The Royal Priesthood and the Glory of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, forthcoming), there is evidence that Levi's actions in Genesis 34 anticipate his latter priesthood, but this providential arrangement of history and inspired penmanship of Moses does not change the fact that nothing in the text has yet identified Levi as a priestly tribe.
- ¹¹ Some commentators identify Levi as the object ["him"] of 1 Sam 2:28 ("Did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? I gave to the house of your father all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel"), but the better reading identifies Aaron as the one chosen. Samuel Ives Curtiss, *The Levitical Priests: A Contribution of the Pentateuch* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1877), 27, 29.
- ¹² The name of Aaron appears 33 times (Exod 28:1 [3x], 2, 3, 4, 12, 29, [2x], 25, 38 [2x], 40, 41, 43; 29:4, 5, 9 [2x], 10, 15, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32, 35, 44). Aaron's sons are mentioned 25 times (Exod 28:1 (2x), 4, 40, 41, 43; 29:4, 8, 9, 10, 15, 19, 20, 21 (4x), 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 35, 44). Likewise, these priestly sons are always set against the "sons of Israel" is used 12 times in these two chapters: 28:1, 9, 11, 12, 21, 29, 30, 38; 29:28 (2x), 43, 45.
- ¹³ As opposed to those exegeting a specific text from the Pentateuch.
- ¹⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 267. Emphasis mine.
- ¹⁵ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998).
- ¹⁶ My two illustrations are not based on works dealing explicitly with Exodus, because I want to show how faithful scholars "remember" the founding of the priesthood. My argument is that our memory is blurry; most remember Levi as a priestly tribe, but not how the Levites were added to the priests, and that the sons of Aaron—not the tribe of Levi—were chosen first.
- ¹⁷ On the connection between Aaron and Adam, see L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 42.
- ¹⁸ Exod 28:1, 9, 11, 12, 21, 29, 30, 38; 29:28 [2x], 43, 45.
- ¹⁹ From a close reading of the genealogies, we discover Aaron married a daughter of Judah (Exod 6:23), thus making his sons "royal priests." Cf. Malone, *God's Mediators*, 83–84.
- ²⁰ John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19:6* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 165–69.
- ²¹ For discussion of this passage, see Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 136–75. Though Hahn's book makes its way to defending the Roman Catholic position on priesthood, he is one of the few who tackle the covenant with Levi and the impact of Exodus 32 on God's covenant with Israel.
- ²² Exod 32:11–13; 32:31–32; 33:12–18; 34:9. For a detailed discussion of this intercession, see W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 168–85.
- ²³ T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 2nd Ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 5.
- ²⁴ The definitive passage on God's choice of the Levites is Deut 33:8–11. It states,

And of Levi he said, "Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your godly one, whom you tested at Massah, with whom you quarrelled at the waters of Meribah; who said of his father and mother, 'I regard them not'; he disowned his brothers and ignored his children. For they observed your word and kept your covenant. They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law; they shall put incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar. Bless, O LORD, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; crush the loins of his adversaries, of those who hate him, that they rise not again."

We will return to this passage at the conclusion of this article.

²⁵ For a full discussion of Deut 10:8, see Curtiss, *The Levitical Priests*, 9–21. His conclusion is that this verse, often adduced to ascribed priestly functions to the Levites does nothing of the kind. The actions of the Levites listed in v. 8 (e.g., carrying of the ark, standing before the Lord, and blessing the people) are all better explained by maintaining a distinction between priests who stand at the altar and Levites who stand around the perimeter. This distinction will be explained when we consider the book of Numbers.

²⁶ Following R. B. Y. Scott, "A Kingdom of Priests" (Exodus 19:6)," OTS 8 (1950): 213–19, Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 69, lists five different ways Exod 19:6 has been taken:

- (1) 'a kingdom composed of priests' (by which Scott understands those who individually have access to God as may be implied by the New Testament references); or
- (2) 'a kingdom possessing a legitimate priesthood'; or
- (3) 'a kingdom with a collective priestly responsibility on behalf of all peoples'; or
- (4) 'a kingdom ruled by priests'; or
- (5) 'a kingdom set apart and possessing collectively, alone among all people, the right to approach the altar Yahweh.'

My argument is that making a mutually-exclusive decision between static arrangements misses the malleability of the Sinai Covenant. For instead of giving us the final form of God's covenant with Israel at Sinai, the rest of the Pentateuch shows how the Sinai covenant is threatened by Israel's sin and then strengthened by the Levitical covenant, etc. Moreover, the original arrangement with Israel is changed as sins break the covenant and layers of priests are added to reinforce the covenant. All in all, it is my contention that what was offered to Israel at Sinai is *not* the same as what they take into the Land. The proof of this argument is found in the pages of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

²⁷ There remains within Israel a compulsion to return to Eden where God's son was a priest-king. For instance, the rest of the OT recounts kings acting like priests (David and Solomon) and priests gravitating towards the crown (e.g., Jehoiada the priest who was buried with the kings). Moreover, if we remember Aaron's priestly garb is regal in appearance (Davies, *Royal Priesthood*, 157–61) and his sons are all heirs of Judah and Levi (Malone, *God's Mediators*, 83–84), then we also find in the history of Israel an ongoing pattern of royal priesthood. Add to this the memory of Melchizedek in the annals of Israel's past, and it is not surprising that the Latter Prophets call for a royal priest (cf. Ps 110; Jer 30:21; Zech 3:1–10; 6:9–15).

²⁸ Davies work on this subject is the most comprehensive (*Royal Priesthood*, 189–237). He traces the way "kingdom of priests" echoes throughout the OT. Unlike other elements of the covenant, this blessed title never again lands on Israel. It is not until 1 Pet 2:5, 9 that the new covenant people of God—comprised of Jews and Gentiles—are called a "kingdom of priests."

²⁹ As Hahn notes, "God had promised Israel at Sinai: 'If you keep my covenant ... then you will be a kingdom of priests' (Exod 19:5–6). Israel failed to fulfill its vocations; it failed to 'keep the covenant.' Consequently, Israel loses the right to serve God as a 'kingdom of priests.' The expression 'kingdom of priests' is not applied to Old Testament Israel as a nation ever again (see 1 Pet 2:9)." *Kinship through Covenant*, 144, emphasis mine. With notable differences, Hahn's approach to the Levitical covenant has been formative for my own argument.

³⁰ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (ABC; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1. Emphasis mine. Going further, he explains, "In Hellenistic times, the term 'Levites' meant priests, and this is what the Septuagint (Greek) and Vulgate (Latin) title *Leviticus* 'Leviticus' means. It is equivalent to the rabbinic title *tōrat kōhanim* 'the manual of the Priests' (Meg. 3:5; m. Menah 4:3) and that of the Peshitta (Syriac) *siprā dekahanā* 'The Book of the Priests.' The Levites, however, are mentioned only in one small passage of Leviticus (25:32–34), almost as an afterthought and in a noncultic context" (ibid.).

³¹ Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*, 29. On the structure of Leviticus, he notes: "While academic dispute over the structure of Leviticus will probably continue, it is significant that a number of scholars, perhaps the widest consensus, accept Leviticus 16 as the literary and theological centre ... Mary Douglas infers that atonement is the central theme of Leviticus, as does Moshe Kline, who believes the reader of Leviticus is placed in a position analogous to the high priest on the Day of Atonement, following the path of holiness through the courtyard, holy place and holy of holies to the centre of the book" (ibid., 32).

³² Ibid., 38.

³³ This figure approximates a diagram by Morales (ibid., 29).

³⁴ Arie C. Leder, quoted by Morales (*Who Shall Ascend*, 24), states, “In the concentric structure of the Pentateuch parallels between Exodus and Numbers suggest that they constitute a frame for Leviticus. Parallels between Genesis and Deuteronomy not only frame Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers thematically, they also provide the beginning and conclusion to the linear sequence of the entire pentateuchal narrative. Thus, Genesis through Deuteronomy exhibits an ABCBA’ organizational format in which Deuteronomy returns to and complements the themes of Genesis, and Numbers returns to and complements the themes of Exodus. This leaves Leviticus occupying the narrative centre of the Pentateuch.” A. C. Leder, *Waiting for the Land: The Story Line of the Pentateuch* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 34–35.

³⁵ As Morales argues persuasively, “By examining the highest macrostructural level of the Pentateuch one is able to sound out the deepest level—the bedrock—of its meaning. In doing so we will find that the final shape of the Pentateuch sets up the priestly cultus quite literally as a light upon a hill.” Ibid., 23.

³⁶ Malone, *God’s Mediators*, 15. Here is a full list of kohens, excising those instances which refer directly to Aaron, his sons, or “anointed priests” mentioned above: 1:9, 12, 13, 15, 17; 2:2, 8, 9, 16; 3:11, 16; 4:6, 7, 10, 17, 20, 25, 26, 30, 31 [2x], 34, 35 [2x]; 5:6, 8, 10, 12 [2x], 13 [2x], 16 [2x], 18 [2x]; 6:6, 7, 10, 12, 22, 23, 26; 7:5, 7, 8, 9, 14, 31, 32; 12:6, 8; 13:3 [2x], 4, 5 [2x], 6 [2x], 7 [2x], 8 [2x], 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17 [2x], 19, 20 [2x], 21 [2x], 22, 23, 25 [2x], 26 [2x], 27 [2x], 28, 30 [2x], 31 [2x], 32, 33, 34 [2x], 36 [2x], 37, 39, 43, 44, 49, 50, 53, 54, 55, 56; 14:2, 3 [2x], 4, 5, 11, 12, 13, 14 [2x], 15, 17, 18 [2x], 19, 20 [2x], 23, 24 [2x], 25, 26, 28, 29, 31, 35, 36 [3x], 38, 39, 40, 44, 48 [2x]; 15:14, 15 [2x], 29, 30 [2x], cf. vv. 16, 27; 16:32, 33; 17:5, 6; 19:22; 21:9, 10; 22:10, 11, 12, 13, 14; 23:10, 11, 20 [2x]; 27:8 [3x], 11, 12 [2x], 14 [2x], 18, 21, 23.

³⁷ Cf. Philip P. Jensen, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 115–48.

³⁸ The logic of this separation is based upon the layers of holiness that increase as one moves closer to the holy of holies.

³⁹ Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Peabody, 1997), 778.

⁴⁰ By their connection to Aaron, by way of his son Ithamar, the Levites are entered into the service of the tabernacle, something developed more fully in Numbers. More specifically, we might find in the language of “under the hand of Ithamar” (*b’yad itāmar*) an allusion to an important identification of priesthood in Israel. In Exodus and Leviticus, the priests were ordained by something called “filling the hand” (see Exod 28:41; 29:9, 29, 33, 35; 32:29). While most English translations gloss this term with the word “ordained,” the idea is one of filling the hand with anointed oil, thus setting apart the priests for consecrated service. As Jenni and Westermann note, “fill the hand” means “the transfer of a person, a population, a realm, etc., into the hands of a particular individual. In Hebrew, however, this phrase “is restricted to the cultic realm and means the investiture of priests and Levites (Exod 28:41; 29:29; cf. 32:29; Lev 8:33; Judg 17:5, 12; 1 Kgs 13:33; 2 Chron 13:9, etc.)” (Jenni and Westermann, *TLOT*, 500). In other words, the placement of the Levites “under the hand of Ithamar” (NASB) is suggestive of the way in which the Levites derived their priestly marching orders. If priests were ordained by “filling the hand,” might Ithamar’s hand be the extension by which the Levites were made “priests”? In light of Ithamar’s place with the Levites, I would suggest the Levites status as priestly assistants comes from their close proximity to Aaron and his sons.

⁴¹ On the linguistic connection between Adam and the Levites, see G. K. Beale, “Adam as the First Priest in Eden as the Garden Temple,” *SB/T* 22.2 (2018): 10–11.

⁴² Cf. Seth Leeman, “Luke’s Priestly Messiah” (ThM Thesis., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019).

⁴³ Num 5:8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 18 (2x), 19, 23, 25, 26, 30.

⁴⁴ “Through this institution [the Nazirite vow], the ordinary Israelite was given a status resembling a priest, for he too became ‘holy to the Lord’ (Lev. 21:6; Num. 6:8).” Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 355.

⁴⁵ Actually, there are two steps in this fall. First, in Numbers 16 Korah leads a rebellion of the Levites. Next, Numbers 25 indicates negligence on behalf of the Levites. We will consider each in due course.

⁴⁶ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 304, observes, “The likelihood is that this group of two hundred fifty was made up from other tribes than the Levites as well as an undetermined number of Levites. These men were not run-of-the-mill Israelites. The text piles up three appositives to show their preeminence: they were *leaders of the congregation ... chosen from the assembly ... and they were important men*” (v. 2).

⁴⁷ R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 262.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Cf. Ashley, *Numbers*, 305.

- ⁴⁹ Korah's rebellion mirrors an antecedent pattern in Scripture. That is, like Cain who refused to see the need for a sin offering after the Fall (Gen 4:7), and like the Israelites who sought to take the Promised Land after God had taken the promise off the table (14:39–45), so Korah's rebellion also seeks to go back to a previous covenantal arrangement.
- ⁵⁰ "Since this word [*qrb*, "brought," v. 6] is the usual term for bringing a sacrifice to the sanctuary (e.g., Lev. 1:2–3, 10; 4:3, 14), it would be logical for the reader to expect that the Israelite devoutly sets out to make amends with the Lord. Alas, what he has in tow is not an animal victim but a lass—and a Midianite one at that (Num. 25:6a)! His mission is not expiation but fornication." Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 717–18.
- ⁵¹ Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114.
- ⁵² Ezek 44:20 reveals the same idea of transmitting holiness from the temple to the people: "And when [the Levitical priests] go out into the outer court to the people, they shall put off the garments in which they have been ministering and lay them in the holy chambers. And they shall put on other garments, lest they transmit holiness to the people with their garments." In this case, the holiness of God is communicated in vengeance upon the transgressors, but through Phinehas's actions he also propitiates the wrath of God for the rest of the people.
- ⁵³ Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 720.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ The biblical-theological pathway that moves from the Levites in Numbers to the priesthood of believers in new covenant is also witnessed in Paul's use of Ps 68:18 in Eph 4:8. As Gary V. Smith, "Paul's Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8," *JETS* 18.3 (1975):187, observes, "The Levites were taken or received from among the sons of Israel as captives for his service, (Numbers 8:6, 16, 18) and are even referred to as "gifts" in Numbers 8:19a: 'And I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and to his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the service of the children of Israel in the tabernacle of the congregation, and to make an atonement for the children of Israel.'" In short, when Jesus received gifts from God in his ascension, Smith argues rightly that this was not only a reference to Ps 68, but that Ps 68 picked up the imagery of the Levites being given to the priests in Numbers. Corresponding to the argument in this article, the more we see the internal logic of Numbers, the better we will understand the logic and chronology of Christ's high priesthood.
- ⁵⁶ Douglas Stuart, "Malachi," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (ed. Thomas E. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 1316–17.
- ⁵⁷ On the nature of Jesus's priesthood, see Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Priest* (London: SPCK, 2018).
- ⁵⁸ On Abraham as a priest, see Schrock, "Restoring the Image of God," 37–41.
- ⁵⁹ Admittedly, even this appellation is not overwhelming in the rest of the OT. It only occurs 16 times after Numbers (e.g., Josh 20:6; 2 Kgs 12:10; 22:4, 8; 23:4; 2 Chron 3:9; Neh 3:1, 2; 13:28; Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4; Zech 3:1, 8; 6:11).
- ⁶⁰ Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers* (Louisville: KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 189–190; Cole, *Numbers*, 544.
- ⁶¹ Daniel I. Block, "'The Meeting Places of God in the Land': Another Look at the Towns of the Levites," in *Current Issues in Priestly and Related Literature* (ed. Roy E. Gane and Ada Taggar-Cohen; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 116–21.
- ⁶² "In effect the eventual death of the individual or that of the high priest ransomed the death of the victim" (Cole, *Numbers*, 555).
- ⁶³ Might this passage serve as another backdrop to the priestly and sacrificial themes in Isaiah 53? It is certainly worth considering.
- ⁶⁴ Considered eschatologically, we could reverse the sentence, saying God's intention was always to make his new covenant people a kingdom of priests. Israel's calling in Exod 19:6 was both real but also impossible, due to the weakness of the old covenant.
- ⁶⁵ In each of these verses, Moses uses two-thirds of the formula from Exod 19:6—Israel continues to be his treasured possession (*segullá*) and holy people, but they are no longer (collectively) a kingdom of priests.
- ⁶⁶ This is the misguided argument of Nicholas Haydock, *The Theology of the Levitical Priesthood: Assisting God's People in Their Mission to the Nations* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).
- ⁶⁷ Smith, "Paul's Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8," 181–89.

