

Deuteronomy 18:1-8
Dr. Steven R. Cook

The Levitical priests [כֹּהֵן *kohen*], the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel [concerning land]; they shall eat the LORD'S offerings by fire and His portion [i.e., animals offered to the Lord at the tabernacle/temple].² They shall have no [land] inheritance among their countrymen; the LORD is their inheritance, as He promised them.³ Now this shall be the priests' due from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice, either an ox or a sheep, of which they shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach.⁴ You shall give him the first fruits of your grain, your new wine, and your oil, and the first shearing of your sheep [the priest was to be blessed in proportion to the nation].⁵ For the LORD your God has chosen him and his sons from all your tribes, to stand and serve in the name of the LORD forever.⁶ Now if a Levite comes from any of your towns throughout Israel where he resides, and comes whenever he desires to the place which the LORD chooses [tabernacle/temple],⁷ then he shall serve in the name of the LORD his God [at that place], like all his fellow Levites who stand there before the LORD.⁸ They shall eat equal portions, except what they receive from the sale of their fathers' estates [i.e., the homes they could own within a city].

Summary

This unit of Scripture is part of a larger section in which Moses addresses four leadership offices God would assign in Israel, namely, **judges** (Deut 16:18-17:8), **priests** (Deut 17:9-13; 18:1-8), **kings** (Deut 17:14-20), and **prophets** (Deut 18:15-22). These four leadership offices were bound by the Mosaic Law, which legitimized their authority and was the guide for their rulership. In this pericope, Moses addresses Israel's responsibilities to care for the Levitical priests, which care was an expression of their righteousness before the Lord (Deut 16:20).

The word *priest* translates the Hebrew word כֹּהֵן *kohen*, which refers to those who drew near to God on behalf of others, usually in sacred matters of prayer and sacrifice. Before the Mosaic Law, few priests are mentioned. Melchizedek functioned as the king/priest of Salem (Gen 14:18-20; cf. Heb 7:1), and Jethro/Ruel (Moses' father-in-law) as the priest of Midian (Ex 2:16-21; 3:1). Job served as the priest over his household, offering sacrifices for the sins of his family (Job 1:5). Most people worshipped and served God as non-priests. Men such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob built temporary stone altars and worshipped God directly (Gen 8:20-21; Gen 12:7; 13:18; 26:24-25; 35:1-7). Before the Mosaic Law, it appears that sacrifice and worship were personal, simple, did not require special attire, and were not tied to a specific geographic location or facility.

After Israel was delivered from the bondage of Egypt, God established the Hebrews as a theocratic nation among the Gentile nations of the world. God originally intended the whole nation to be a kingdom of priests, saying, “and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). However, because of the sin of worshipping the golden calf (Ex 32:1-35), God took that privilege from the nation and gave it solely to the tribe of Levi (Num 3:6-10).

All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. The priests were a minority group within the tribe of Levi. Qualified Levites helped the priests in their duties at the tabernacle/temple (Num 3:6-9; 1 Ch 23:28-32), but only those Levites who descended from Aaron could serve as priests in Israel (Num 3:10). The distinction between priests and Levites continued into the NT (John 1:19; Luke 10:31-32). Levites were not given land (Num 18:20, 23-24), but could live in one of forty-eight cities that were assigned to them (Num 35:7). Their living was derived from the tithe (Num 18:21, 24-28), and they could eat part of the animal sacrifice (Lev 7:31-34), which their family could eat as well (Lev 10:12-15). Even Levites who did not serve at the tabernacle/temple were to be supported for the work they performed within their local communities (Deut 14:28-29; 16:10-11). Apparently, they could also purchase property within the cities where they lived, and then sell that property if they moved (Deut 18:8).

God required that Levitical priests could not have any physical defects (Lev 21:16-23), and restricted the age from twenty-five to fifty (Num 8:24-25). The Levitical priests originally served at the tabernacle, and later at the temple. Special clothing was required both for the priests and the high priest. Throughout the years of their priestly service, they were required to:

1. Be holy in their behavior (Ex 19:6)
2. Teach God’s Law to others (Deut 31:9-13; Ezra 7:10; Mal 2:7)
3. Offer sacrifices for sin to God (Lev chapters 4, 9, 16)
4. Help adjudicate legal matters (Deut 17:8-13; 19:16-17; 21:5; 2 Chron 19:8-10)
5. Preserve the tabernacle and temple (Num 18:1-7)
6. Perform official duties in the Holy of Holies once a year (Ex 30:6-10; Lev 16)
7. Inspect persons, animals, and fabrics for cleanness (Lev 1:3; Deu 15:21)
8. Receive the tithes (Num 18:21, 26; cf. Heb 7:5)
9. Carry the ark of the covenant (Deut 10:7-8; 31:9)
10. Guide by means of the Urim and Thummim (Ex 28:30; Num 27:21; Deut 33:8)
11. Facilitate the festivals of Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Booths (Deut 16:1-17)
12. Pronounce God’s blessing on the nation (Num 6:22-27).

Sadly, the practice of priests had degenerated into idolatry during the time of the Judges (Judg 17:5-13; 18:1-31), gave corrupt teaching during the time of Malachi (Mal 2:7-8), and practiced corruption during the time of Christ (Matt 26:59-66).

Concerning the pericope in Deuteronomy 18:1-8, Moses opens by saying, “The Levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel; they shall eat the LORD’S offerings by fire and His portion. ²They shall have no inheritance among their countrymen; the LORD is their inheritance, as He promised them” (Deut 18:1-2). This is consistent with other statements that the Levites were not given land (Num 18:20), but could live in one of forty-eight cities that were assigned to them (Num 35:7). All Levites derived their income from the tithe (Num 18:21), and they could eat part of the animal sacrifice (Lev 7:31-34), which their family could eat as well (Lev 10:12-15). Even Levites who did not serve at the tabernacle/temple were to be supported for their work within their communities (Deut 14:28-29; 16:10-11).

Moses continues, saying, “Now this shall be the priests’ due from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice, either an ox or a sheep, of which they shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach. You shall give him the first fruits of your grain, your new wine, and your oil, and the first shearing of your sheep” (Deut 18:3-4). What the priests received as compensation was their “due from the people.” The provisions mentioned here pertain to basic necessities of food (ox, sheep, grain, wine, and oil) and clothing (shearing of sheep). Not only that, but the priests were to receive the best parts of the animal (shoulder, cheeks, stomach), and the “first fruits” of the grain, wine, and oil, as well as the “first shearing” of the sheep. The priests were giving their best to help their fellow Israelites know God’s Word and to live God’s will. If the people followed their spiritual instruction and walked in the ways of the Lord, He would bless them and their land. Naturally, it follows that God’s people would give their best to the priests as an expression of appreciation for their spiritual leadership. Daniel Block wrote:

The gifts brought to the priests must be choice gifts: the shoulder, jowls, and the stomach of the animals; the first of the processed grain, wine, olive oil; and the first fleeces of their flocks. These expressions remind the Israelites of Yahweh’s abundant provision and reinforce their duty to treat the priests as generously as Yahweh has treated them.¹

What the Levites received from the people was largely based on the fact that God had chosen them for special service, as Moses stated, “For the LORD your God has chosen him and his sons from all your tribes, to stand and serve in the name of the LORD forever”

¹ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 428.

(Deut 18:5). The Levites were to serve in the presence of the Lord and receive the offerings presented by their fellow Israelites. In this way, the Levites were at the mercy of their countrymen.

Moses differentiated between Levites who served within their local communities and those who served as the tabernacle/temple, saying, “Now if a Levite comes from any of your towns throughout Israel where he resides, and comes whenever he desires to the place which the LORD chooses,⁷ then he shall serve in the name of the LORD his God, like all his fellow Levites who stand there before the LORD” (Deut 18:6-7). A Levite could serve his entire life within his local community where he resided. However, he also had the option of leaving his residence and moving to the location of the tabernacle/temple and serving there.

If a Levite desired to serve at the tabernacle/temple, he could expect to receive equal portions of what was brought for worship. Moses said, “They shall eat equal portions, except what they receive from the sale of their fathers’ estates” (Deut 18:8). Remember, the Levites were not given land at the time of the conquest of Canaan (Num 18:20, 23-24); however, they could purchase a house within a city (Lev 25:32-34), as well as pastures where their livestock could graze (Num 35:2-5). If a priest decided to relocate to the central sanctuary, he could “eat equal portions” (Deut 18:8a) of the offerings that were given to the priests there, and also benefit “from the sale of their fathers’ estates” (Deut 18:8b). Warren Wiersbe comments:

The priests and Levites could purchase land if they wanted to (1 Kings 2:26; Jer 32:7; Acts 4:36–37) and even get an income from the land; but their major interest had to be serving at the sanctuary and helping the people know God and obey His Word. If a Levite sold or leased his property and came to the sanctuary because of his love for the Lord and His house, he must be permitted to serve there and to share in the gifts that the people brought. The fact that he earned money by leasing or selling his land did not change this policy.²

The apostle Paul was thinking of these verses in Deuteronomy when he wrote to the church at Corinth, saying, “Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel” (1 Cor 9:13-14; cf., 1 Tim 5:17-18; Gal 6:6). Elsewhere he wrote, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 120–121.

he is threshing,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’” (1 Tim 5:17-18). And, “The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him” (Gal 6:6).

Though all Christians are priests (Rev 1:6), and the Lord promises to meet all our needs (2 Cor 9:8; Phil 4:19), He has also gifted some men to serve as Pastor-Teachers within the church to help all believers know the Scriptures in order that they might advance to spiritual maturity and be equipped for good works (Eph 4:11-13). Pastor-Teachers are a gifted minority group within the Christian community, and these have their place of service. However, all Christians are ministers who serve the Lord in some capacity. Some Christians have public roles, but most work behind the scenes, sharing the gospel and Scripture with family and friends, praying for others, keeping facilities clean, showing hospitality when gathering together, ministering as faithful spouses, or godly parents who teach their children to serve the Lord, or obedient children who honor their mother and father, or moral citizens of a nation. These too will be recognized and rewarded by the Lord for the faithful work they do. Those believers who learn and live God’s Word can expect to maximize their spiritual influence on others and to be rewarded by Christ when their earthly life is over and they stand before Him for judgment (1 Cor 3:10-15). I pray we all take our ministry roles seriously and humbly submit ourselves to the Lord and walk in faith and love.