

# The Levitical Priesthood

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Thankfully, the complex subject of the Levitical priesthood in ancient Israel has been cultivated by helpful studies related to its history and development, as well as to the social place and basic tasks of Levitical priests, in terms of serving at Yahweh's house and guarding its sacred space, mediating Israel's access in the divine service, and teaching divine *torah*.<sup>1</sup> Rather than rehearsing such studies, the present essay attempts instead to offer a modest sketch of the theology of Israel's priesthood. Serving as something of a typology of the priesthood, and one that resonates with the temple ideologies of other ancient cultures, we will examine the fundamental analogy between cult and cosmos. Before doing so, however, we will begin with the origin of the Levitical priesthood, which may then serve to inform the theology of both the Levitical priesthood's basis and its eventual obsolescence.

That Aaron, Moses' elder brother, was chosen by God to serve as high priest, his house to carry on the priestly lineage of Israel, is asserted in the book of Exodus (24:1, 9; 28:1-3; 29:1-37; 32:1-6; etc.), and then confirmed magnificently in the stories and legislation found in Numbers 16-18, which center upon Aaron's budding staff.<sup>2</sup> However, Yahweh's choice of Aaron's house is simply assumed, and not explained. He is first introduced in Yahweh's response to Moses as "Aaron the Levite your brother" (4:14), and thereafter joins Moses as his "prophet" in delivering Israel out of Egypt

(7:1-2). Beginning at Exodus 27, within the context of the instructions for the tabernacle, the role of Aaron and his sons in the divine service is, again, merely assumed (27:21; 28:1-43; 29:1-37; etc.). In recounting the origin of the Levitical priesthood, therefore, we will begin more broadly with the special role of the tribe of Levi.

### **THE TRIBE OF LEVI REPLACES THE FIRSTBORN SONS OF ISRAEL**

The biblical narrative sets forth the replacement of Israel's firstborn sons by the tribe of Levi as the occasion that ever after marked out the Levites as a priestly class. Jewish tradition thus fully assumes what is a fair deduction from Scripture, namely, that before the inauguration of the Levitical priesthood cultic duties were the charge of the household's firstborn son, a commonplace practice in the ancient Near East. Some of the Targums, for example, such as *Onkelos*, translate the Masoretic Text's "young men of the sons of Israel" who offer up burnt offerings in Exodus 24:5 as the "firstborn sons" of Israel (see also *TPs-J* on this verse; *b. Zeb.* 115b). Perhaps in accord with the general picture that emerges with Hannah's consecration of Samuel, her firstborn, to serve in the sanctuary at Shiloh (1 Sam 1-2), Israel's firstborn sons were to be consecrated for service to Yahweh.<sup>3</sup> In the Passover legislation of Exodus 13, Yahweh had said, "Consecrate (*qaddes*) to me all the firstborn" (v. 2), and again in Exodus 22:29 he declared, "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me." In Numbers, however, Yahweh takes the Levites "instead of every firstborn" so that the "Levites shall be mine," to serve in place of the former (3:12-13; see also 8:14-18). This commission was part of the blessing the Levites received for standing with Moses in zeal for Yahweh, for their being willing to oppose any brother or son who had committed idolatry with the golden calf (Exod 32:26-29; cf. Deut 33:8-9), presumably not having committed apostasy themselves. It would seem to follow, then, that the tabernacle duties given to the Levites would otherwise have been rendered by Israel's firstborn sons.<sup>4</sup> Originally, then, the firstborn sons of Israel were to serve in a lay-priestly role (assisting Aaron and his family once the latter were designated by Yahweh), but the Levites replaced the firstborn.

The progress to this lay-priestly status of the Levites may be traced in the following manner, beginning with the significance of the firstborn sons of

Israel.<sup>5</sup> The book of Exodus provides three statements on the consecration of the firstborn (Exod 13:1-16; 22:28-29; 34:10-27), and Numbers gives three statements on the replacement of the firstborn by the Levites (Num 3:5-13; 3:40-43, 44-51; 8:13-19). Exodus 13:1-16 is set within the larger context of the Passover legislation and begins with Yahweh's command to consecrate to himself all the firstborn males of the womb, both human and animal, as belonging to him and, thereby, requiring that firstborn sons be redeemed. Exodus 34:10-29, paralleling the previous Passover legislation, further combines the consecration of the firstborn in Exodus 22:28-29 with the annual feasts legislation of Exodus 23:14-19 so that the consecration of Israel's firstborn sons is set within the overall theology of firstfruits (particularly the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Ingathering). Turning to the passages in Numbers, each of the three texts has a specific function:<sup>6</sup> Numbers 3:5-13 states the principle that Levites will replace the firstborn and therefore provide Aaron and his sons assistance in their priestly duties at the tabernacle; Numbers 3:40-43, 44-51 establishes the redemption price paid to Aaron's house for firstborn sons in excess of Levites; Numbers 8:13-19 explains that the Levites function as a *těnúpâ* ("wave" or "elevation") offering in place of the firstborn for Aaron's house. This latter text, in particular, fills in the theology of Levitical service. The *těnúpâ* offerings were those portions set aside specifically for the support of the priesthood; Israelites were thereby giving Aaron's priesthood the tribe of Levi in place of their own firstborn sons for the purpose of assisting the priesthood with their sacred duties. By God's own direction, the Levites become an offering and then a gift: an offering from Israel both owed and yielded to God (who claimed the firstborn as his own), and which God himself then gave as a gift (*nětunîm*) to the Aaronic priesthood. This is precisely the dynamic of the *těnúpâ* offerings: from Israel to God to the priests. Further, Numbers 8:19 states that the Levites function to perform the tabernacle work on behalf of the sons of Israel at the tent of meeting, and to make atonement for them so that they will not be plagued when drawing near the sanctuary. The Levites serve quite literally as a buffer zone between God and Israel, a lightning rod, as Milgrom put it,<sup>7</sup> attracting God's wrath upon themselves whenever an Israelite encroached upon the sancta. We may fill in this theology of the Levites by returning to what appears to be the focal point of their election by God, in the aftermath of Israel's apostasy with the golden calf in Exodus 32:26-29. Here the Levites had aligned themselves decisively with Yahweh and Moses, separating

themselves from the other tribes of Israel to carry out the divine judgment. Upon this demonstration of zeal for Yahweh's honor, the Levites were called by Moses to consecrate themselves in order for Yahweh to bestow a blessing upon them—an expectation that is not picked up until Numbers 3:5. Their zeal for loyalty to Yahweh God, then, fitted the tribe of Levi to function as the firstborn sons of Israel, that is, to become the representatives of all Israel, not only before God and the nations, but before all Israel—modeling for the other tribes the goal of consecration unto Yahweh for the rest Israel to emulate.

Now while the change from Israel's firstborn sons to the Levites is often taken for granted readily from the vantage point of subsequent history, yet it would be difficult to overemphasize the radical nature of such a shift. Numbers records the quite negative initial response among the tribes of Israel, the self-assertion and jealousy that recall the firstborn rivalry stories in Genesis. Likely, the inauguration of the Levitical priesthood would have affected the tribe of Reuben in particular. Here the Targum of 1 Chronicles is telling. Amidst the genealogy of Reuben found in 1 Chronicles 5:1-3, the following comment is included: "As for Levi, he was a godly man, and (the Levites) did not act sinfully in the affair of 'The Calf,' so the high priesthood was taken away from the sons of Reuben and, because of them, from all their firstborn, and given to Aaron and his sons, the sacred service (was given) to the Levites."<sup>8</sup> The import of this reading will become apparent momentarily. We turn now to the central narrative of Numbers, the rebellion of Korah in chapters 16-17. Intriguingly, Abraham Ibn Ezra, the famous 11<sup>th</sup> century Jewish commentator of Spain, suggested that Korah's rebellion had occurred as a direct consequence of the replacement of the firstborn by the Levites, following the events of the golden calf. Korah, a firstborn himself (Exod 6:25), claimed that in transferring priestly duties Moses had acted without God's approval; he was unwilling, therefore, to accept a secondary role in the sanctuary service and approached the censuring test with the confidence of long-standing tribal tradition.<sup>9</sup> Moses' response accords well with this reading: "you shall know Yahweh sent me to do all these works, because I have not done them of my own will" (16:28). Korah and his band of rebels argued, furthermore, that "all the congregation is holy (*qəḏōšim*)," a point not only resonating with Yahweh's declaration that "Israel is my firstborn son" (Exod 4:22) but especially relevant to the firstborn sons of Israel, whom Yahweh had consecrated (*qaddes*) to himself (Exod 13:2). Clearly, Korah was "seeking the priesthood" (Num 16:10). It cannot be superfluous,

then, that Korah is introduced in Numbers 16:1 as “the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi.” Nor, returning to our previous discussion, is it likely a coincidence that in the same verse the other named rebels, Dathan, Abiram, and On, are introduced as “sons of Reuben,” that is, descendants of Jacob’s firstborn son. Indeed, as Oehler had observed in a previous century, it is “especially the princes of the tribe of the firstborn, Reuben, who demand a priesthood on the broadest basis.”<sup>10</sup> The Midrash (*Numbers Rabbah* 18:5) observes, further, that the camp of Reuben was on the south side of the tabernacle (Num 2:10), the same location as the camp of Kohath (Num 3:29), suggesting the two groups united in rebellion after having fed upon each other’s discontent. As for the 250 of the sons of Israel, designated “princes (*něšî’ê*) of the congregation, called ones of the assembly, men of name” (Num 16:2), Ibn Ezra remarks that they were also firstborn who had formerly offered the whole burnt offering, and who used to carry the censers.<sup>11</sup>

In retrospect, information and detail offered in Numbers, as well as earlier in the Pentateuch, can be understood as preparation for reading the central Korah narrative. Along with Korah’s lengthy pedigree in Numbers 16:1, scholars have also noted the highly selective genealogy found in Exodus 6:14-25, which begins with Reuben and Simeon but remains with and develops Levi’s line alone. Childs questioned why Izhar’s line is traced with such detail,<sup>12</sup> and Magonet provides the clearest answer: the lineage functions first and foremost to give the relation of Korah to Aaron and Moses—they are first cousins—in order to provide a “cast list and essential background for the Korah rebellion.”<sup>13</sup> We also discover in Numbers 3:30 that leadership of the Kohathites had fallen to Elizaphan the son of Uzziel (Kohath’s fourth son). Given that Aaron the son of Amram (Kohath’s first son) led the priesthood, it would have been natural for leadership of the Levites to go to Korah (Kohath’s second son). For this reason, rabbinical tradition detected Elizaphan’s leadership of the Levites as a slight on Korah, deepening his motive for rebellion. More explicitly, however, the first ten chapters of Numbers offer several foreshadowings of the events of chapter 16.<sup>14</sup> Numbers 1:53 delineates the duty of the Levites to encamp around the tabernacle so as to shield the camp of Israel from the divine “wrath” (*qesep*), a term which does not appear again until the incidents related to the Korah episode (16:22, 46 [MT 17:11]; 18:5). Similarly, in Numbers

8:19 the Levites replace the firstborn to make atonement for Israel, lest there be a “plague” (*negep*) when any other sons of Israel attempt to approach the sanctuary. This precise form of “plague” as *negep* (versus *maggēpā*) is not used elsewhere in Numbers aside from 16:46 (which also contains *qešep*). Finally, it is worth noting that in Numbers 4:15-20 a dire warning is spoken by Yahweh: the Kohathites must not touch or even gaze upon the sacred objects, lest they die and be cut off from among the Levites. Understanding the displacement of the firstborn by the Levites as described in Numbers, then, enables one to appreciate more deeply the events of the wilderness narratives. Upon the resolution of the central rebellion, Yahweh reaffirms his will: “No longer will the sons of Israel draw near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites are the ones who will serve in the service of the tent of meeting; they are the ones who will bear their guilt” (18:22-23).

In summary, the tribe of Levi replaced the firstborn sons of Israel. However, since the sons of Israel themselves represented the nation as a whole, one may see that the tribe of Levi served as a substitute for Israel itself in the cult. More so, within the tribe of Levi, Aaron’s house represented Israel with the high priest serving as the nation’s mediator, interceding for the twelve tribes before Yahweh, and representing Yahweh to Israel. We turn now to consider the prominent role of the Aaronic priesthood in the Pentateuch.

### **AARON’S FAMILY LINE IN NUMBERS**

This prominence of Aaron’s priesthood in the Pentateuch only makes sense given the events of redemptive history narrated in the second half of Exodus and through the book of Leviticus: namely, the building of the tabernacle as the dwelling of God, and as the meeting place between Yahweh and Israel. As with the cosmos and humanity, tabernacle and priesthood go together—Israel would have no access to God’s house apart from an ordained priesthood to offer sacrifices, mediating that relationship. While Leviticus presents Aaron and his sons in the role of mediating Israel’s access to the tabernacle, in the divine service, the book of Numbers sets forth Aaron’s priesthood as vital for the nation’s survival of the wilderness judgments of God. As will be developed below, by use of the *toledot* formula the Pentateuch’s narrative builds a highway from Adam to Aaron, from the archetypal priest to the Levitical priest—or, perhaps better, from Adam to the cultic Adam.

It is surely curious that Numbers 3:1-4 contains a *toledot* formula (*'ēlleh tōlēdōt*), which is otherwise restricted to Genesis as one of its major structural features.<sup>15</sup> Generally speaking, one function of these formulae is to introduce the subject matter of the following narrative(s), in terms of human characters, progressing and focusing the story through a genealogical line. While this device happens to coincide with the structure of the book of Genesis, yet its thematic and narrowing function is primary, unifying the Pentateuch. The formula in Numbers 3 is the final and twelfth use, the number twelve perhaps not being coincidental, possibly reflecting the twelve tribes of Israel. There are no literary grounds for excluding Numbers 3:1 from the basic *toledot* scheme;<sup>16</sup> on the contrary, there is a logical explanation for why the formula picks up again in Numbers, a reason consistent with its use in Genesis. In the book of Genesis, the historical narrative's focus progresses and narrows from Adam and all humanity to the twelve sons of Jacob that become the twelve tribes of Israel. For the books of Exodus and Leviticus, there is no need for another *toledot* formula inasmuch as the focus is still upon Israel—on Israel's deliverance out of Egypt and the gift of the tabernacle cultus within the context of a covenant relationship with Yahweh God (note the use of the recurring phrase "sons of Israel" throughout the rest of the Pentateuch). In Numbers, however, the spotlight narrows upon the family of Aaron as the hereditary line of the high priesthood. In his study of the *toledot* formula, Thomas affirmed that on a literary level the Pentateuch's narrative moves from all humanity (the *toledot* of Adam) to focusing on a specific group of people (the *toledot* of Jacob/Israel) and eventually to the leadership of this group (the *toledot* of Aaron and Moses in Num 3).<sup>17</sup> Stated differently, while Genesis steadily progresses to the formation of Israel, the book of Numbers, beginning with chapter 3, narrows the focus further particularly upon Israel's cultic leadership. This focus is not, however, to the exclusion of the nation's civil leadership nor to that of all Israel, a point which is in keeping with the addition of the conjunctive *waw* to the formula (*wē'ēlleh*), a feature serving to coordinate Aaron's line *within* the history of Israel's sons as a subheading, rather than marking a major section break.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, the addition of "and Moses" in the formula of Numbers 3:1 acknowledges his prominent role as the nation's mediator and civil leader, and the ensuing narrative does progress to Moses' replacement by Joshua (Num 27:12-23). Still, Joshua's succession does not conform to the genealogical implication of the *toledot*

(from *yld*, “to beget, bear”). Moreover, the peculiar priority of Aaron’s name in 3:1 reflects more than his being the elder brother; rather, and in accord with the formula’s use in Genesis, it signals the particular focus of Number’s narrative drama upon Aaron’s line, for it is in Numbers that both the Levitical tribe and Aaron’s line are divinely confirmed as hereditary (Num 17-18).

Typical of its use in Genesis, then, the *toledot* of Numbers 3:1 serves as something of a heading that “introduces the high priest’s lineage (3:2-4) and the overview of the Levitical duties (3:5-4:49),”<sup>19</sup> and also signals the focus of the book’s ensuing story. Indeed, the *toledot* of Numbers 3:1 is the seventh and final narrowing of focus in the Pentateuch—again, for a total of twelve instances of the formula—and marks a new era in Israel’s identity as a kingdom of priests and holy nation.<sup>20</sup> Within this new beginning, as Sweeney correctly observes, Numbers 3:1-4 “focuses on the foundation of the priestly line of Aaron and Moses as the culminating stage of the Torah’s account of the history of creation. Aaron is the primary figure in this presentation insofar as his son, Eleazar, will through his own son Phineas (see Num 25:10-18) become the founder of the line of high priests that will ultimately serve in the Jerusalem Temple (1 Chron 5:27-41).”<sup>21</sup> In part, then, the *toledot* functions “to trace world history as the genealogy of the Israelite priesthood, who anchor their origin in heaven and earth (Gen 2:4); all humanity (Gen 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10); Israelite ancestors (11:27; 25:19; 37:2); Levites (Exod 6:16); and finally, Aaron and Moses (Num 3:1).”<sup>22</sup> In a variety of ways, the wilderness section of Numbers especially (chapters 11-25) demonstrates Israel dire need for Yahweh’s gift of the priesthood. Numbers 16-17 show that Israel may only have life from God, and refuge from divine wrath, through the mediation of his divinely chosen cultic mediator, Aaron. In Numbers 19, the Aaronic priest plays a crucial role in the ritual that allows those with corpse pollution to be readmitted into the camp, the place of blessing. The, on the brink of the journey’s end, the second generation of Israelites experience their own “golden calf” moment, falling into apostasy and sexual immorality with the women of Moab in Numbers 25—“Israel was joined to Baal of Peor” (25:3). Yahweh’s wrath breaks out and begins decimating Israelites by the thousands. The reader is left forlorn to wonder if the people of God will ever make it out of the wilderness alive. Just when all hope is lost, however, the young, zealous priest and grandson of Aaron, Phineas, arises and makes atonement for Israel. Yahweh commends the young priest

for his decisive intercession on behalf of God's people, and awards him with a covenant of peace, so that Aaron's priestly line now narrows through Phinehas, whose descendants will serve in Jerusalem, at Solomon's Temple. By Phinehas' action, the narrative is able to start over, as it were, with a new census in Numbers 26. For all intents and purposes, the wilderness sojourn is over in the sense that there are no more tests, grumbings, or trials—the rest of Numbers, chapters 26-36, is pervaded by an atmosphere of confident expectation for life in the land. Israel survived the wilderness, not through the nation's righteousness, but by role of Aaron's priesthood on their behalf.

### **GOD'S DWELLING: COSMOS AND MICROCOSM, ADAM AND AARON**

As the Levitical priesthood forms one complete system with God's dwelling (*miškān*), the tabernacle and later temple, the significance of Aaron's house should be sought in relation to the meaning of the dwelling. Accordingly, we will review briefly the theological symbolism of the tabernacle before turning to the priesthood. Perhaps the key insight into the role and purpose of the tabernacle begins with understanding that, originally, the cosmos itself was created to be God's house wherein humanity would enjoy fellowship with God. Only when that house became polluted by sin and death, did a secondary and provisional house—the dwelling—become necessary. One would, therefore, expect a measure of correspondence between the tabernacle and creation, which is precisely the case. In the ancient Near East, the analogy between cosmos and temple was commonplace.<sup>23</sup> The creation account of Genesis 1:1-2:3 depicts God as a builder who makes a three-story house (heaven, earth, and seas) in six days, and then, upon its completion, takes up residence within it, enjoying Sabbath rest. Indeed, throughout Scripture the cosmos is often portrayed as God's house, his sanctuary or temple. The psalmist says, for example, that God stretches out the heavens like a tent and lays the beams of his chambers in the waters (Ps 104:2-3; cf. Isa 40:22). Both ancient and contemporary interpreters also note significant parallels between the creation and tabernacle accounts of the Pentateuch, including the language of blessing and sanctification used to describe their completion.<sup>24</sup> Also, while creation is recounted in seven paragraphs (for seven days), culminating in the Sabbath, there are, similarly, seven divine

speeches recounting the instructions for the tabernacle (Exod 25-31), the seventh speech culminating with Sabbath legislation that refers directly to God's Sabbath of Genesis 2:1-3 (see Exod 31:12-18). The 'Spirit of God' enables the construction of both God's house as cosmos (Gen 1:2) and God's house as tabernacle (Exod 31:1-5). Moreover, though typically lost in English translations, the creation account uses tabernacle terminology, particularly on the central fourth day (Gen 1:14-19): the "lights," referring to the sun and moon, planets and stars, actually reads "lamps," which elsewhere in the Pentateuch always refer to the lamps of the tabernacle lampstand; and the "seasons" for which the lamps function refer rather to "cultic festivals," using a term that in the Pentateuch becomes synonymous with Israel's feasts.<sup>25</sup> These features, along with the Sabbath day that culminates the account, serve to portray the cosmos as a grand temple, in which humanity has the priestly privilege of drawing near to God in worship and fellowship—with all of creation, including the sun, moon, and stars, serving as a call to worship. The cosmos as a three-storied house of heaven, earth, and seas, will be mirrored in the tabernacle's threefold structure with the holy of holies corresponding to God's heavenly throne room. The purpose of creation, then, is for God and humanity to dwell in the house of God in fellowship. As humanity's chief end, Sabbath day communion with God is highlighted since the seventh day is the only object of sanctification in the entire book of Genesis (2:3).

In the Eden narratives (Gen 2:4-4:16), the tabernacle imagery develops richly, with the garden of Eden portrayed as the original holy of holies.<sup>26</sup> The lushness of Eden is captured in the fullness of life associated with the tabernacle, including the lampstand, a stylized tree that some have compared to Eden's tree of life (and the vision of Ezekiel's temple includes a river of life as well, Ezek 47:1-12). The Lord's presence in Eden, described as 'walking,' is presented similarly with the tabernacle (Gen 3:3; Lev 26:11-12). Perhaps most explicitly, the garden of Eden was oriented toward the East and, after the expulsion of Adam and Eve, cherubim—fierce, composite creatures—were stationed to guard the garden's entrance (Gen 3:24), features which in the ancient world commonly marked the entrance to a sanctuary. The only other place in the Pentateuch where cherubim show up again is in relation to the curtains and atonement-lid of the tabernacle (Exod 25:18-21; 26:1,31), which also faced eastward (Exod 27:9-18; Num 3:38). The author

of *Jubilees*, a second century BC Jewish work, understood Eden as just such an archetypal sanctuary, writing that Noah “knew that Eden was the holy of holies and the dwelling of the LORD” (8:19).<sup>27</sup> For our purposes, let us observe that the sanctuary context of Eden serves to portray Adam, in turn, as the primal high priest of humanity (and, to be sure, the Adam figure of Ezekiel 28:11-19 is also portrayed in a priestly manner). Various features of the text support this view: the portrayal of Adam’s work in the garden, translated better as “to worship and obey” (Gen 2:15), is used elsewhere only to describe the work of the Levites at the tabernacle (Num 3:7-8), and even the language for God’s clothing of Adam and the woman reappears later in Moses’ clothing of the priests (Gen 3:21; Lev 8:13). Adam, then, was an archetypal high priest serving within the original sanctuary of Eden.

The main point of the literary and theological parallels with the cosmos is that the tabernacle system (including furnishings, the priesthood, sacrifices, calendar, and rituals), as a gift from God, was meant to recapture God’s ideal for creation, reaffirming his intention to dwell with humanity. The glory cloud’s movement upon the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34, therefore, represented a new creation filled with the glory of God, with Aaron and his line serving the role of a new Adam for this “creation.” Theologically, then, to say that the cosmos was God’s original tabernacle, with Adam serving as the archetypal high priest within the holy of holies of Eden’s garden, is to understand, rather, that the tabernacle was created to reflect creation, that the holy of holies signified the garden of Eden, and that the priesthood functioned by office as a renewed humanity. Put differently, the tabernacle system was like a snow globe, a microcosm within the cosmos, a ritual model of creation complete with its own humanity. For this reason, the Adamic identity of Aaron may be considered fundamental for understanding the theology of the Levitical priesthood and cult.<sup>28</sup> That the priests were to be healthy and whole physically (Lev 21:17-23), and to refrain from mourning (Lev 10:6-7; 21:1-3), for example, was part of their role in portraying humanity’s Edenic life with God.<sup>29</sup> It may even be precisely because he functions as an Adam-figure that the high priest’s sin propagated guilt among the entire people of Israel (Lev 4:3).<sup>30</sup> In any case, the portrait that surfaces from the Pentateuch’s intertextuality is of Aaron’s high priesthood and house functioning as an Adam figure and renewed humanity within the restored Eden of the tabernacle. Crispin Fletcher-Louis thus remarks

that, “in the temple-as-restored-Eden,” the service of the high priest may be understood as his “doing what Adam failed to do,” so that Israel’s priesthood sacramentally reconstituted “the God-intended humanity of Genesis 1” in the temple-as-microcosm.<sup>31</sup> As with the parallels between the cosmos and tabernacle, so there is an equally rich history of interpretation noting the theological correspondences between Adam and Aaron as high priest.<sup>32</sup> To offer but one illustration, Ginzberg, in his *Legends of the Jews*, writes: “On the sixth, the last day of creation, man had been created in the image of God to glorify his creator, and likewise was the high priest anointed to minister in the tabernacle before his Lord and creator.”<sup>33</sup>

The analogy between tabernacle and creation, and between the high priest and Adam, leads to another important observation. Namely, rituals find their significance in relation to creation and may be understood more deeply in light of the early narratives of Genesis. On the Day of Atonement, especially, we find the story of humanity’s expulsion out of Eden reversed: as an Adam figure, the high priest would journey westward through the cherubim-guarded entry into the garden of Eden—that is, through the cherubim-embroidered veil into the holy of holies—and this with the blood of atonement. On this holy, autumn day, the blood of purification, from that of a vicarious, blameless substitute, was used to cleanse God’s dwelling from the inside out, beginning in the holy of holies and then progressing ever eastward into the holy place, and then eastward to the altar of whole burnt offering. Afterward, the high priest leaned both hands upon the head of a scapegoat, confessing the sins and guilt of Israel over the animal, and then the goat was driven away farther eastward out into the wilderness, a visible display that the sins of God’s people had been removed “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps 103:12). Through the blood manipulation of the sacrificial goat and the driving out of the scapegoat, loaded with Israel’s guilt, the tabernacle, as God’s dwelling and model cosmos, was ritually cleansed of the death-pollution of the sins of Israel.

### **THE PROVISIONAL NATURE OF THE LEVITICAL PRIESTHOOD**

The analogy between tabernacle and creation makes clear that the display of rituals like the Day of Atonement, which cleansed only the model of the cosmos, would need to take place on the stage of creation itself for the sake

of God's original house, the cosmos. Here, the point that the Levitical priesthood is linked inseparably from the microcosm, merely serving an analogous function, is crucial. Although the Levitical priesthood performed the Day of Atonement ritual at the microcosm, yet another priesthood would be necessary to perform the reality of the Day of Atonement for the cosmos, God's original house. This is part of the message of the book of Hebrews, whose author turns the scandal of Jesus' not having a Levitical lineage, apparently precluding him from priestly ministry, into a logical necessity: If Jesus were a Levite, his sacrifices and ministry would have been limited to the model of the cosmos, the temple. Jesus, however, has accomplished the true Day of Atonement by entering, not the model of heavenly paradise, that is, the temple's holy of holies, but the reality—indeed, he has entered “heaven itself,” and this, not with the blood of bulls and goats that had represented the life of humanity, but with his own blood (Heb 9:11-15, 23-28). Because Jesus truly was and is a new Adam-figure in his humanity—indeed the Last Adam—he is able to function as high priest of the cosmos—as the firstborn son of God, his priestly ministry precedes and supersedes that of the Levitical cult. It seems likely that the priesthood of Melchizedek has deep ties to the notion of the firstborn son serving as priest, which as noted earlier forms the basis of the replacement by the tribe of Levi, but this line must be pursued elsewhere.

Following on the previous point, the issue of the Levitical cult's efficacy naturally surfaces: what did the Levitical priesthood actually accomplish in the lives of God's people? Here, two brief answers are offered. On the one hand, Levitical rituals were prophetic. After Nadab and Abihu's divine judgment rendered the tabernacle defiled by corpse pollution, for example, the microcosm was suddenly found to be in the same condition as the cosmos. Yet, as the history of redemption narrated in Genesis demonstrates, God will not dwell in a house (the cosmos) polluted by sin and death. When, then, Yahweh reveals legislation for the Day of Atonement ritual, providing a way for the microcosm to be cleansed of defilement so that God may continue to dwell among his people, a mental leap is hardly required for one to ask: “Is such a cleansing for the cosmos-as-house also possible?” Certainly, the Levitical cult did not restore humanity's Edenic life with God as set forth in Genesis 1-3, and could not possibly be conceived as the final, divine solution for humanity's separation from the life-giving presence of Yahweh

God. Rather, what God demonstrated with the model (tabernacle) unveiled his intentions for the reality (cosmos). Later scriptural developments of the theology of the feasts, like Booths in Zechariah 14, and usage of cultic terms for God's promised blessings, such as the Spirit's cleansing of Israel in Ezekiel 36:25-27, exhibit a profound grasp of the prophetic nature of the cult.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, on the other hand, it must be maintained that the cult was more than mere drama, however wondrous. Sacramentally, and founded upon the coming accomplishment of the Messiah, the sacrifices were indeed effectual.<sup>35</sup> By way of illustration, when one purchases merchandise by credit, the goods are really possessed and enjoyed in advance of actual payment. Similarly, through the Levitical priesthood and cult, ancient Israelites sincerely received spiritual benefits like the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, but only because God the Father received such sacrifices against the person and work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The sacrifices were signs and seals of the redemption of Jesus; they functioned as so many fingers pointing to Christ and him crucified.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, when God ushers in the new heavens and earth, creation having been cleansed by Christ's atoning work and renovated by the fires of his Holy Spirit, there will be no need for a temple building—for God's people will dwell with God in the house of God's new creation, the cosmos. The tabernacle and later temple, again, were provisional for the era between creation and new creation. Even now, moreover, as those who already participate in the life of the age to come now, Christians are precious stones, united by the Spirit with Christ who is the living and chief cornerstone, who form the temple of the living God, filled with the Spirit of God (1 Pet 2:4-9; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). The New Testament declares that with the advent of Jesus Christ, the Levitical cult has become obsolete. Yet, by the same analogy that undermines any continuing efficacy for the Levitical cult, including that of the Aaronic priesthood, the Old Testament sacrificial system now serves a new and fundamental theological purpose as it informs and unfolds the *reality* of what God has accomplished through his beloved Son and humanity's only mediator, Jesus the Messiah.

- <sup>1</sup> Aside from dictionary entries on the priesthood, see Peter J. Leithart, "Attendants of Yahweh's House: Priesthood in the Old Testament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24.85 (1999): 3–24; Mark Leuchter, "The Priesthood in Ancient Israel," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 40.2 (2010): 100–110; Mark Leuchter and Jeremy M. Hutton, eds., *Levites and Priests in Biblical History and Tradition* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, "Aaron's Rod (Numbers 17:16-28)," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93.2 (1981): 280–81.
- <sup>3</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 128.
- <sup>4</sup> As Thomas observes, "The sons of Aaron are set aside as the priests of Israel, but the rest of Israel is represented in the Levites. The sons of Levi stand in for the firstborn of Israel." Matthew A Thomas, *These Are the Generations: Identity, Promise and the "Toledot" Formula* (New York; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011), 78.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Gershon Brin, *Studies in Biblical Law: From the Hebrew Bible to the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 176; Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994), 221–37.
- <sup>6</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, "The Literary-Historical Dimensions of Intertextuality in Exodus–Numbers" (presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, Ga., 2015), 1–14.
- <sup>7</sup> *The JPS Torah Commentary Numbers = [Ba-Midbar]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publ. Soc., 1990), 371.
- <sup>8</sup> Derek Robert George Beattie and J. Stanley McIvor, eds., *The Targums of Ruth and Chronicles* (The Aramaic Bible v. 19; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 64.
- <sup>9</sup> Yosef Green, "The Rebellion of the Bechorim," *Dor Dor* 14.2 (1985): 77–81.
- <sup>10</sup> *Theology of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 201.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Numbers (Ba-Midbar)* (trans. H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver; New York: Menorah Publishing Company, 1999), 127.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2004), 117.
- <sup>13</sup> "The Korah Rebellion," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24 (1982): 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Magonet, "The Korah Rebellion," 10–13.
- <sup>15</sup> For the structural significance of the toledot formula in Numbers, see Dennis T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (Brown Judaic Studies no. 71; Chico, Calif: Scholars Press, 1985), 83–125.
- <sup>16</sup> Sven Tengström, *Die Toledotformel und die literarische Struktur der priesterlichen Erweiterungsschicht im Pentateuch* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1981), 55–56; cf. J. Severino Croatto, "The Function of the Non-Fulfilled Promises: Reading the Pentateuch from the Perspective of the Latin-American Oppressed People," in *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Ingrid R. Kitzberger; London ; New York: Routledge, 1998), 49.
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas, *These Are the Generations*.
- <sup>18</sup> Jason S. DeRouchie, "The Blessing-Commission, the Promised Offspring, and the Toledot Structure of Genesis," *JETS* 56.2 (2013): 232–33; Thomas, *These Are the Generations*, 124–25.
- <sup>19</sup> DeRouchie, "The Blessing-Commission, the Promised Offspring, and the Toledot Structure of Genesis," 223.
- <sup>20</sup> Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New*, 108; Thomas, *These Are the Generations*, 81.
- <sup>21</sup> Sweeney, *Tanak*, 128.
- <sup>22</sup> Thomas B. Dozeman, *The Pentateuch: Introducing the Torah* (Grand Rapids: Fortress Press, 2017), 9.
- <sup>23</sup> See Jon D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *Journal of Religion* 64.3 (1984): 275–98; John M. Lundquist, "The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East," in *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting Toward a Temple-Centered Theology* (ed. L. Michael Morales; Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 49–67.
- <sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Peter J. Kearney, "Creation and Liturgy: The P Redaction of Ex 25—40," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89.3 (1977): 375–87; Moshe Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple, and the Enthronement of the Lord—The Problem of the Sitz Im Leben of Genesis 1:1-2:3," in *Mélanges Bibliques et Orientaux En l'honneur de M. Henri Cazelles* (ed. A. Caquot and M. Delcor, AOAT 212; Kevelaar/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker/Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 501–12.
- <sup>25</sup> Walter Vogels, "The Cultic and Civil Calendars of the Fourth Day of Creation (Gen. 1:14b)," *Scandinavian Journal of Old Testament* 11.2 (1997): 163–80; D. J. Rudolph, "Festivals in Genesis 1:14," *Tyndale Bulletin* 54.2 (2003): 23–40.
- <sup>26</sup> For the following parallels, see Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting Toward a Temple-Centered Theology* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 161–66; L. Michael Morales, *The Tabernacle Pre-Figured: Cosmic Mountain Ideology in Genesis and Exodus* (Biblical Tools and Studies 15; Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 88–90; L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 51–56.
- <sup>27</sup> James H. Charlesworth, ed., "Jubilees," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (trans. Orval S. Wintermute, vol. 2;

- Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 73.
- <sup>28</sup> Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, "God's Image, His Cosmic Temple and the High Priest: Towards an Historical and Theological Account of the Incarnation," in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Simon J. Gathercole; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 96; Crispin H.T. Fletcher-Louis, "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 1," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 4.2 (2006): 159.
- <sup>29</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 64; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Eerdmans., 1979), 24; A. T. M Cheung, "The Priest as the Redeemed Man: A Biblical-Theological Study of the Priesthood," *JETS* 29 (1986): 265–275.
- <sup>30</sup> Cf. Richard D. Nelson, *Raising Up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 73.
- <sup>31</sup> Fletcher-Louis, "High Priestly Messiah 1," 159; Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 5.1 (2007): 76.
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. C. T. R. Hayward, "The Figure of Adam in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian Hellenistic and Roman Period* 23.1 (1992): 1–20; Joel Marcus, "The Son of Man as the Son of Adam," *Revue Biblique* 110 (2003): 374.
- <sup>33</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), III:150.
- <sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "Sukkot, Eschatology and Zechariah 14," *Reue. Biblique* 103.2 (1996): 161–95.
- <sup>35</sup> On this topic, see Benjamin J. Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice and Heavenly Cult in Hebrews* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).