

Episode 3: People with a Purpose: Levites, Nazirites, Priests and People

1. **The POSITIONS on Israel’s Team**
   1. The Levites
   2. The Nazirites
   3. The Priests
   4. The People
2. **THE LEVITES**
   1. ***50****But appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it. They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of it and shall camp around the tabernacle.(1:50)*
   2. *The census of* Levi (Num. 1:47–54; 3:1–17, 38–51; 8:5–26): The Levites are not to be included in the regular census, for God has especially adopted them and made them supervisors over the Tabernacle. All male Levites one month old and older are to be counted. They are to begin serving at the Tabernacle at age 25 and must retire at age 50.
   3. The Numbers of the Levite Clans (Num. 3:18–24, 27–30, 33–35)
      1. Gershonite clan (Num. 3:21–24): 7,500 males
      2. Kohathite clan (Num. 3:27–30): 8,600 males
      3. Merarite clan (Num. 3:33–35): 6,200 males
   4. Positions and Roles of the Levite Clans (Num. 3:25–26, 31–32, 36–37; 4:1–49)
      1. *Gershonites* (Num. 3:25–26; 4:21–28, 38–41): They are to camp on the west side of the Tabernacle and are responsible for its curtains and coverings.
      2. *Kohathites* (Num. 3:31–32; 4:1–20, 34–37): They are to camp on the south side of the Tabernacle and are responsible for its furniture (the Ark, the lampstand, etc.).
      3. *Merarites* (Num. 3:36–37; 4:29–33, 42–49): They are to camp on the north side of the Tabernacle and are responsible for its crossbars, posts, frames, etc.
   5. **Duties** and **Privileges** of the Levites(Num. 18:1–32): Details relating to their duties.
      1. The Priests and Levites are distinct—but not separate.
      2. The Levites were to be the Leaders of the Israel’s most Sacred Occupation—The Worship of God.
      3. Lay Leaders as distinguished from Clergy
      4. Three Roles
         1. To Promote and Protect the Sanctity of the Worship of God
         2. To Promote and Protect the Spiritual Health of the People
         3. To Move the Tabernacle and Mobilize the People when the Lord Moved.
3. **THE NAZIRITES**
   1. ***…****When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the Lord,(6:1-2)*
   2. *Separation*(Num. 6:1–21): The Nazirite vow was a special type of voluntary devotion to God in ancient Israel. Nazirites, who have dedicated themselves totally to God, are required to observe three vows:
      1. *Abstain from anything that comes from the grapevine* (Num. 6:3–4). The grapevine was a source of physical pleasure, and abstention from it represented a life given over to God.
      2. *Abstain from cutting their hair* (Num. 6:5). Allowing the hair to grow signified abstention from human adornment.
      3. *Completely avoid going near a dead body* (Num. 6:6–7).
   3. *Famous Nazirites*
      1. Joseph is called a *nazir* (Gen. 49:26; Deut. 33:16).
      2. Samson is the most famous, explicitly named Nazirite; and much of the irony and pathos of the narrative cycle lies in Samson’s gradual loss or deprivation of his special God-given status (Judg. 13:7; 16:17).
      3. Samuel is not explicitly named one but the wording of the vow made by his barren mother, Hannah (1 Sam. 1:11), strongly suggests he should be counted a Nazirite.
      4. Both Samson and Samuel were consecrated by vows uttered when they were still in their mothers’ wombs. In the nt it is likely that one of the significances attached to Jesus’ being called a ‘Nazarene’ (Matt. 2:23) is that he too should be viewed as a Nazirite in the sense of being consecrated to God from the womb.[[1]](#footnote-1)
4. **THE PRIESTS**
   1. The family of Moses and Aaron
      1. Position: camped on the East.
      2. Duties
         1. **Guard** the sanctuary itself and to protect the people of Israel.
         2. **Serve** in the Temple performing ritual functions and conducting the sacrificial services.
   2. **History:** In the patriarchal period (ca. 2000-1700 b.c.) there was no official priesthood. The head of the family performed sacrifices in various holy places (Gen. 31:54). The only priests mentioned at this time are of nations that were not nomadic and had fixed sanctuaries (e.g., Gen. 41:50; Exod. 3:1). As the Israelites developed a more structured society, a special class came to preside over the more and more complex rituals that their religion entailed.
   3. **Identity:** The priesthood was limited by Pentateuchal law to the Levites, that is, members of the family of Levi, the son of Jacob. According to Deuteronomy, all the levitical families had a right to the priesthood since they did not receive an inheritance of land like the other tribes (Deut. 10:8–9). Aaron and his sons exclusively received the anointing oil and were attired in special clothing of the priesthood (Exod. 28–29). The families of Eli at the temple of Shiloh (1 Sam. 14:3), Zadok in Jerusalem (Ezek. 40:46), and Amaziah at Bethel (Amos 7:10–17) were not specified as Aaronites but were of levitical descent.
   4. *Prophet vs. Priest:* 
      1. *A Priest speaks to the people on behalf of God.*
      2. *A priest Speaks to God on behalf of the people.*
      3. *Moses, PROPHET/ Priest. Aaron, PRIEST*
   5. **The supplication (prayer) to be uttered from the Tabernacle** (Num. 6:22–27): Aaron and his sons, the priests, are instructed to pronounce this blessing over the people of Israel: “May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you *(be made happy by you; may you make the Lord smile)* and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you (show you favor) and give you his peace.”*“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”*
   6. **Functions:** 
      1. The Performance of Sacrifices
      2. Maintenance and stewardship of the Tabernacle (and later Temple).
      3. Public Health: When a person suffered a disease or physical sign of impurity, the purification rites were performed by a priest.
      4. Divine Consultation:
         1. Urim and Thummim (Num. 27:21).
         2. Lots (Num. 26:55–56; 1 Sam. 10:20–21).
      5. Judging (Num. 5:11–3; Deut. 17:9; 12; Ezek. 15:1, 8). The priests administered the ordeal of the suspected adulteress.
      6. Teaching the law to the people of Israel (Deut. 33:10).
   7. Priestly Expectations: Although Israel is said to be ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exod. 19:6), it was the priesthood that embodied the highest levels of sanctity in ancient Israel.As a prestigious, elite class the priests were also expected to preserve the holiness of the sanctuary and the uniqueness of the people of Israel. Therefore, they were subject to added restrictions not incumbent upon the average Israelite.
      1. A priest was forbidden to officiate if he had a physical defect (Lev. 21:17–24), was ritually impure, was under the influence of alcohol, or had married a woman forbidden to a priest.
      2. A priest was allowed to marry only a virgin of Israel, not a divorcee, prostitute, convert, or, in the case of the high priest, a widow (Lev. 21:14). Ezekiel makes an exception of the widow of a priest (Ezek. 44:22).
      3. A priest could not defile himself by attending the cemetery except for the burial of a close relative (parent, sibling, child, or wife; Lev. 21:1–3).
         1. The high priest could not have contact with the dead even if they were his parents (Lev. 21:11).
         2. Upon the death of Aaron’s sons, Moses forbade Aaron and his remaining sons to manifest the signs of mourning during the week of their consecration (Lev. 10:6).
   8. Jesus Christ, Our High Priest:
      1. Christians transferred the role of the priest as mediator between God and humans onto Jesus whom they saw as both God and man.
      2. He became eternal High Priest by God’s appointment (Heb. 5:1–6) and supplanted the ancient sacrificial system by his own sacrifice (Heb. 7:27–28; 9:23–26).
5. **THE PEOPLE**
   1. ***5****Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;* ***6****and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” (Exodus 19:5-6)*
   2. **The Priesthood of All Believers: *9****But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* ***10****Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)*

1. Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). In [*Harper’s Bible dictionary*](https://ref.ly/logosres/hbd?ref=Page.p+689&off=4396&ctx=+Nazirites%0a~Nazirites+(na%CA%B9zuh-ri%CC%84ts%3b+Heb.) (1st ed., pp. 689–690). San Francisco: Harper & Row. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)