

Numbers 8:12-19

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Having been inwardly and outwardly purified, the Levites now needed atonement. This involved the sacrifice of the two bulls supplied by the Levites and the presentation of them before Aaron. Aaron in turn presented them as a wave offering before the LORD. Once this was done, the Levites were dismissed in order to assume their duties in the tabernacle.

The next part of the consecration ceremony involved sacrifice. First, the Levites were required to *lay their hands on the heads of the bulls* (v. 12). This laying their hands on the heads of the sacrificial bulls represented both a transferring of their guilt and an expression of their commitment to the task that the LORD commissioned them to do.

Next, they were to *offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the Lord*. The *sin offering*, described in detail in Leviticus 4:1 – 5:13, was offered to purify a person from sins committed unwittingly or inadvertently (Leviticus 4). It also was offered for sins of omission (Leviticus 5:1 – 13).

The *burnt offering* was significant in many ways. First, it was an act of worship that would be pleasing to the LORD (a “sweet aroma”, see Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17, etc.). This meant that God was satisfied (or “propitiated”, see Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17, and 1 John 2:2). This would result in the sinner (here, the Levite) being acceptable to the LORD. Symbolically, it also meant that the offeror, by killing the bull, was giving his life back to the LORD who is the life-giver. All this stems from the basic principle of justice, that death is the payment for sin (Hebrews 9:22). This is a picture that looks forward to the first advent of Jesus. Thankfully, Jesus came to earth as a human and paid for all the sins of the world by the sacrifice of Himself (Colossians 2:13-14; Hebrews 9:26-28).

The purpose of the offerings was *to make atonement for the Levites*. The word for *atonement* (Heb. “kaphar”) means “to cover.” It atoned (or “covered”) the sins of the person. The result would be that the person would be acceptable to the LORD. This again looks forward to Jesus, who atoned for the sins of the world (John 3:16).

Once the sacrifices were given, Moses and Aaron were to *have the Levites stand before Aaron and before his sons so as to present them as a wave offering to the Lord* (v. 13). The “wave offering”, as said in verse 11, symbolized that the Levites belonged to the LORD and were given to the priests.

As a result of these offerings, Moses and Aaron were instructed to *separate the Levites from among the sons of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine* (v. 14). From this point on, the Levites’ occupation was to serve the priests in their duties as well as carrying the tabernacle on their journey to the Promised Land.

The conclusion, then, was *after that the Levites may go in to serve the tent of meeting* (v. 15). As seen in the previous verses, Moses and Aaron were to *cleanse them and present them as a wave offering*, the reason being that the LORD declared that *they are wholly given to Me from among the sons of Israel* (v. 16).

The phrase *wholly given* is literally “given given” (“natunim natumin”) in the Hebrew text. The repetition of this word was indicative of great emphasis (hence, the translation *wholly given*). The LORD then stated that He has *taken them for Myself instead of every first issue of the womb, the firstborn of all the sons of Israel*. When the Israelites left Egypt, the LORD had declared that all the firstborn were to be set aside and given to Him (Exodus 13:2). This was now changed to the Levites, who were now made a wholesale substitution to take the place of the firstborn from every family.

In verses 17 – 19, the LORD summarizes what He has done in regard to the firstborn and the Levites. He stated again that *every firstborn among the sons of Israel is Mine, among the men and among the animals* (v. 17). This applied to all males born in Israel, not just those from the tribe of Levi.

God further declared this: *on the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them for Myself*. The account of His killing *all the firstborn in the land of Egypt* is found in Exodus 12:29. This emphasizes that God had declared that every firstborn son was now set apart for His service, those whom He redeemed in the “Passover”—when the death angel passed over every door adorned with blood (Exodus 12:23). Thus, from the point of the Passover forward the firstborn males were set aside for dedicated service to the LORD.

God states that He *struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt* because Israel was His firstborn, and Pharaoh refused to let them go (Exodus 4:22-23). God considered Israel His son in Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My Son.” Jewish tradition holds that what happens to Israel happens to the Messiah. This might be evidenced in the New Testament writings, as Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 as a prophecy that applied to Jesus (Matthew 2:15).

Verse 18 is almost identical to verse 16. It stressed again that the LORD had *taken the Levites instead of every firstborn among the sons of Israel* (v. 18). Rather than taking the firstborn male from all families, God now instead substituted all males from the tribe of Levi in their place. The principle of substitution is found throughout scripture, including Jesus, who died in our place.

Also, the LORD has *given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and to his sons from among the sons of Israel* (v. 19). The Levites were a gift from the LORD to the priests to help them both to *perform the service of the sons of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement on behalf of the sons of Israel*. Aaron and his sons were from the tribe of Levi, and they now had their brethren to help them in their service.

The Levites were to ensure *that there will be no plague among the sons of Israel by their coming near to the sanctuary*. That is, the Levites, being placed around the tabernacle were to protect the

holiness of the tabernacle from any unauthorized access. The people were thus not allowed to come near to the tabernacle, and the Levites made sure that they could not approach it.

So, the Levites had the following duties:

- Assisting the priests in their tasks in and around the tabernacle. This consisted mainly of carrying the pieces of the tabernacle and its furnishings
- Being substitutes for the firstborn of the Israelites (vv. 16, 18)
- Being an “atonement” (or a protective buffer) between the sinful, unclean people of Israel and the holy tabernacle (Numbers 1:53)

Biblical Text

¹² Now the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls; then offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the Lord, to make atonement for the Levites. ¹³ You shall have the Levites stand before Aaron and before his sons so as to present them as a wave offering to the Lord. ¹⁴ “Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the sons of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine. ¹⁵ Then after that the Levites may go in to serve the tent of meeting. But you shall cleanse them and present them as a wave offering; ¹⁶ for they are wholly given to Me from among the sons of Israel. I have taken them for Myself instead of every first issue of the womb, the firstborn of all the sons of Israel. ¹⁷ For every firstborn among the sons of Israel is Mine, among the men and among the animals; on the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them for Myself. ¹⁸ But I have taken the Levites instead of every firstborn among the sons of Israel. ¹⁹ I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and to his sons from among the sons of Israel, to perform the service of the sons of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement on behalf of the sons of Israel, so that there will be no plague among the sons of Israel by their coming near to the sanctuary.”