

The Temple

Ministry and The Levites

Ministry in the Temple was carried out mainly by priests and Levites. Both groups were technically considered Levites. Both traced their roots to the tribe of Levi. However, they entered Temple service to perform different tasks. Priests formally entered ministry through a ritual of consecration. Priestly consecration took place originally when ritual vestments were placed upon the candidate. It indicated their ritual role and leadership position. As entry rituals developed, oil became part of the consecration liturgy.

Ministering to the Ark began for Levites when it dwelt under the Tent. Before moments when it became housed under a roof. Many procedures they practiced in the Temple of Jerusalem began in the desert and were preserved. They entered their ministry officially by a ritual of purification. They were washed. Purification implied being set apart. Levites were purified by water and not oil. Very little suggests they received any particular clothing.

Sacrifices were offered at both entry ceremonies. Priests functioned differently. People saw them primarily as ritual celebrants at the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense. Service to the altar concentrated their ministry. In contrast, Levites primarily supported priests in those two altar ministries, but their responsibilities expanded to general care of the Temple. We first learn of Levites as special men assigned to serve the Dwelling. Pitching the Tent of Meeting and taking it down, the Lord assigned specifically to Levites. They alone carried the Tent from place to place. They lived the privilege of carrying and guarding the most sacred of Israel's possessions. Camped around the Ark, they assured it not be approached by anyone unauthorized. They functioned as caretakers for the Dwelling but also made themselves available for whatever priests needed for their services.

Levites officially entered Temple service in their twenties. Being from Levite families, they learned much of what was expected of them from Levite fathers. A certain period of training took place at home before joining the Temple.. Priests and Levites were not given land at the original settlement. They needed to find homes while serving at the Temple. Priests lived near the Temple as soldiers lived near the palace. Levites lived in Levite cities.

Most ministry descriptions in Scripture suggest a backdrop of the Jerusalem Temple. Stories are also told of priests and Levites at local sanctuaries. Sacrifices may have been carried out locally at smaller places of faith. The Davidic move toward centralization frowned upon isolated areas of ritual. What carried out at these locations, they lacked the Ark of the Covenant. Stressing centralized power, King David emphasized Jerusalem as the center for worship. Worshipping one God should have

one place for worship. This mentality supplied a reason for the Ark being carried there. In Jerusalem pilgrimages should be held, a holy city built to welcome large crowds. The city supplied a unique opportunity for Israel to express national unity and identity. Ministry at the Temple in Jerusalem was a privilege.

Service at the Temple puts on display the full extent of Levite ministries. As mentioned, one responsibility was functioning as gatekeepers. Worshippers must pass a Levite before entering beyond the Court of the Gentiles. That position gave them power to accept or refuse certain individuals. It encouraged acquaintance with worshippers. Priests related more formerly with those entering. Seeing some faces provided Levites with the means of identifying troublemakers whom they could turn away. Levites mingled more with people. Various relationships were established. Worshipers were more likely to ask Levites questions concerning various Temple procedures. How to offer a gift, where to pay the Temple tax, at what time rituals began? They protected gates but also served as spiritual receptionists.

A story is told of a TV personality in Britain interviewing children. To one little girl he asked, "What do you think the Queen does all day?" The girl answered, "She cleansed the castle." One task Levites carried out was cleaning the Temple, particularly the Temple building. Beside them only priests were allowed inside the Holy Place. Sacrifices at the inside altar of incense were celebrated twice a day. Coal needed for this sacrifice were brought in from the altar of sacrifice. Coal dust and traveling in and out were reasons enough for cleaning. A building housing the presence of God would expect extreme care. The Court of the Priests would also need cleaning. At the end of a day, the sacrificial altar and laver would need much attention. The top of the altar of sacrifice would need extreme washing at the end of the day. Also preparation was necessary for next day of services.

Among the more sacred duties Levites performed inside the Temple involved the Bread of the Presence. It stood on a golden table facing the Holy of Holies. The Levites were responsible for baking that bread every week and seeing it placed on that table for the Sabbath. The priest's role was to consume the bread each Sabbath in the Holy Place. The Levites' baked it and delivered it to the special table. Such a task brought them right to the curtain of the Holy of Holies. The bread was believed holy because of its nearness to the Divine Presence. Levites came as close to that Presence as most priests.

During worship times, Levites' role at the altar of sacrifice became very active. They received animals offered for sacrifice and delivered them to the priest. The offerer was responsible for killing the victim. That was not the role of the priest. He received the dead animal and poured its blood at the foot of the altar. Then he washed the victim. The washing required pans for drawing water from the laver located on the other side of the Court. The priest remained at the altar while Levites carried water pans back and forth for washing both priest and animal offered at each service.

After washing the victim, the priest cut the animal into small portions, placing them on the grill of the altar, fired by coals below. Levites kept that fire burning by the steady delivery of coal when needed. Washing the priest was necessary after sacrifices as well before because of their dangerous closeness to the Divine. Washing released them from any harm from ritual intrusion into the atmosphere of the Holy One. These tasks required of Levites much walking back and forth.

Beside assisting at the altar, some Levites specialized in music which accompanied sacred services. Trained not only for singing, some performed on a variety of instruments. Music would have been a ministry for which they had special training. Some even were song writers. King David promoted this aspect of ministry. From descriptions provided by Scripture, David himself possessed musical talent. His own feelings for music led to the major part music played in Temple worship.

Temple priests came and went according to services in a single day. Levites' tasks kept them present on Temple grounds throughout the day. Their contact with people involved information roles, listening, advice to those not yet wanting to approach the priests. Added to daily services, Levites' ministry changed dramatically when major feast days were celebrated and numbers of people became overflowing.

We mentioned the secular side of religion. These activities too demanded Levite service. Some were entrusted with Temple's finances. They collected whatever was donated through almsgiving boxes and whatever was given by other means. People sought to satisfy tithing obligations in various ways. Not all had money available and could only donate from what they might have grown on their land. The treasuries also would be the Levites' responsibility. They could be chief treasurers of all Temple finances and goods. That would mean paying salaries of Temple workers: priests, other Levites, police, and outside workers needed for repairs.

Therefore, Levites served in ways beside their liturgical use. They performed such ministries as: crowd control, cleaners, maintenance, finances, music. Priests depended on them when needed. They really made the Temple come alive when necessary, whether on ordinary or special feast days. Without Levites, much of what took place in the Temple would come to a halt. They were truly servants of the Temple.