The Levitical Priesthood and the Mission of God

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Aim of the Thesis

The aim of my research was to provide a canonical theology of the Levitical priesthood and from there assess their role within God’s mission.

The Levites have either been neglected by evangelical theologians or misunderstood by their liberal counterparts. Liberal theology beginning with Wellhausen chose to see the priestly theology as the aftermath of a post-exilic political struggle which the Zadokites eventually won. It’s unnecessary to here go into the many reasons for refuting such a reading; but to say that my supposition is that a theology of the priesthood shows that far from being a political power seeking to justify their superiority, we see that their service was only acceptable when administered in humility.

With regard to the neglect shown by the evangelical church, the Levitical order is often labelled as the legalistic other, or dismissed as redundant now that Christ’s priesthood has superseded it. I seek to show the inaccuracy of these statements in my study primarily by pointing to the perpetual nature of God’s covenant with Levi, which is repeatedly affirmed. In seeking therefore to offer a canonical theology of the Levitical priesthood, I emphasise that God requires the priesthood to suffer humility; a ministry which is affirmed, continued and embodied in Christ’s priesthood.

More than just providing a canonical theology of the priesthood, my conviction is that such a reading must be ‘missional’; that is, it must place itself within the narrative of God’s mission to the world. My study seeks to achieve this in two ways; firstly by outlining the relationship between the Levites’ and the wider Israelite society. By viewing Israel from a sociological standpoint we can see that the Levites were to be an outward sign of a spiritual reality grasped by the nation as a whole. This is clearly observed in Ex. 19:6 where God calls the Israelite nation ‘a royal priesthood’; we see then that the function of the Levites is to inform the nation’s identity amongst and in relation to the nations which surround them. I am not of course the first to offer such an exposition of Ex. 19:6, however such expositions have previously been limited by the lack of a developed theology of the Levites.

Secondly, in addition to the Levites’ missional function towards the people, is their representation of a missional God. God, while being all powerful, chooses to suffer and humble himself due to his love for the world and consequent desire to reveal himself. To participate with God in his mission is therefore also to imitate God in suffering humility, and the Levites’ being central to Israel’s cultic life are a prime example of this fact.

Method and Structure

My research involved surveying the theology of the Levitical priesthood throughout the canon of scripture.

This does not mean that I determined to read the ‘Old Testament’ through the lens of the ‘New’. To be clear it was not my focus to make sense of the canon in light of the book of Hebrews, as many have sought to do, but rather to make sense of Hebrews in light of the wider testimony of the canon. This is not to suggest that I think there to be any great discrepancy between the two, but only to recognise the danger of misunderstanding the
writer of Hebrews if read in isolation. At the same time I do not assume that ‘Old Testament Theology’ must be kept as a separate discipline, for we hold that there is a fundamental continuity in the theology of the canon.

At this point I might add that I do not consider the direction of the canon to be primarily ‘christocentric’, but rather ‘theocentric’ in that scripture is written for and by the people of God to inform them as they live out and within the will and purposes of their God. With regards to methodology therefore, my interest is primarily related to how this theological understanding of the priesthood informs and shapes the community of believers within the context of God’s mission. This is not to say that the priesthood do not point towards Christ. Where appropriate I draw on this aspect, but not so as to silence the primary concerns of the text.

In turning our attention to consider more carefully the shape of this research, my purpose was not so much to systematically analyse any and every mention of the Levites, but rather to draw out the main themes and metaphors which relate to the priesthood’s ideological identity. The findings of this study are therefore presented thematically, where each theme speaks of the suffering and humility required of the priesthood. In so doing I sought to cover the functions and metaphors ascribed to the priesthood and demonstrate their relationship to the overarching missional narrative and the concept of suffering humility. After placing the research within the context of biblical theology, sociology, missiology, I then expounded each function in turn. To conclude the study I then considered how our findings are reflected in the canon after Christ.

**Key findings and Reflections**

The Levitical priesthood provided both Israel and her scriptures with a rich theological base from which to reflect upon their God, his mission and their role within it. In the course of my study I trace themes such as holiness, slavery, landlessness, tithing, and the teaching of the Law among others, which all support our hypothesis; that Israel fulfills her missional identity in suffering humility, for which the priesthood is a prime informant.

In this final section I will offer a case study focusing on one aspect of the priesthood’s role, that of being a sacrifice. In doing so I hope firstly to demonstrate the outworking of our aims and methodology, and secondly to begin to consider the implications of my findings.

**The Levites as a Holy Sacrifice**

Israel was to be a ‘holy nation’ (Ex. 19:6), which would stand as a testimony to the surrounding nations of God's loving kindness. Consequently without holiness Israel could not measure up to the missional role given to them (Wright, 2006, p333). I suppose and elsewhere argue that holiness is a positioning of the self before God, to be of use in his mission; specifically this requires a posture of servitude and suffering. At the same time their sanctity is directly related to their sacrificial function.

The relationship between the priesthood’s holiness and their role as a sacrifice for the nation is clearly and most obviously seen in their consecration ceremony.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the Levites from among the sons of Israel and cleanse them. Thus you shall do to them, for their cleansing: sprinkle purifying water on them, and let them use a razor over their whole body and wash their clothes, and they will be clean. Then let them take a bull with its grain offering, fine flour mixed with oil; and a second bull you shall take for a sin offering. So you shall present the Levites before the tent of meeting. You shall also assemble the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, and present the Levites before the Lord; and the sons of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites. Aaron then shall present the Levites before the Lord as a wave offering from the sons of Israel, that they may
qualify to perform the service of the Lord. 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. You shall have the Levites stand before Aaron and before his sons so as to present them as a wave offering to the Lord. (Numbers 8:5-13, NASB)

This consecration ceremony which presents the Levites as an offering, qualifies them for service. The Levites devotion is ultimately to God (Levine, 2007, p442) who has assigned them to serve under the jurisdiction of the priests (Levine, 2007, p278). Just as an animal being sacrificed is representative of the offerer (Kiuchi, 1987, p112), so also the Levites are representative of the whole nation. This is demonstrated within the ceremony when the Israelites lay their hands on the Levites as the Levites are offered to the Lord. I should also point out that through this wave offering, the Levites redeem Israel's firstborn (Olson, 1996, p49), a point which will be explored further elsewhere.

This understanding that the Levitical priesthood were themselves meant to be a holy sacrifice on behalf of the people, also helps us to reflect theologically on the genealogical records contained in Ezra. 2-3 and Neh. 7.

Before the exile, David had divided the priesthood, according to the heads of twenty four Levitical families, with each taking different responsibilities (1. Chr. 24). However, among the home comers there were only four of these families present, which meant that the priestly tasks had to be redistributed (Kidner, 1979, p39). It seems that although most Jewish families kept records of their genealogies (1 Chr. 5:17), some of these records had been lost in the exilic period. In the case of the Levites, those unable to prove their lineage were not permitted to function as priests (Fensham, 1982, p55).

Many readers struggle to make sense of the genealogical records in Ezra; aside from making an uninviting read, it seems to be suggestive of racial exclusivism (Williamson, 1985, p38). Indeed the concern for pedigree certainly seems to have blossomed into a sense of superiority by the time of the New Testament (Kidner, 1979, p41); making it difficult for the Christian to square these passages with Jesus’ words of criticism (Matt. 3:9). In biblical scholarship also, the hereditary nature of the priesthood has often been misconstrued as the outworking of tribal politics (Tiemeyer, 2006, p198), and labeled ‘elitist’ (Milgrom, 2007, 53).

At other points in the study I demonstrated that the priesthood was not rigidly hereditary; people could be incorporated into it and cut off from it. In what sense and for what purpose then do these texts record and value the genealogies of the priests? I would suggest that a lineage which legitimized a Levite’s true descent from Levi, notions the idea that the Levites were to be an unblemished offering on behalf of the people. This concept is evidenced by the fact that the Levites number about a tenth of the returnees (Blenkinsopp, 1972, p98), the portion of Israel’s tithe and offering to God. The genealogies in Ezra therefore demonstrate that God had not abandoned his covenant with the Levites; they were to continue in their sacrificial ministry because he was committed to using them in his mission, even as he had determined to do in Num. 8.

Reflecting on their Role as Sacrifice

In order to extensively draw out the implications of this metaphor, we would have to first explore its connections with other themes such as holiness, the Levitical representation of the firstborn, tithing and their function in offering sacrifices. Nevertheless I wish to conclude this article by reflecting on one particular aspect of the ‘Levites as Sacrifice’, that being election.
That the Levites were the nation’s representatives before God does not mean that God loved them more than any other Israelite. Similarly Israel’s election was not divine favouritism, but the choosing of an instrument through which God’s love and justice would be declared to the world. I have already shown that the election of the priesthood was for the purpose of service, as indeed was the election of this priestly nation. Specifically both Num. 8 and the genealogical records in Ezra-Nehemiah reveal that their ministry necessitated sacrificial administration. For the people of God to truly appreciate their election in light of God’s mission, they must never lose sight of the call to offer themselves up as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1).

For believers today, the Levitical priesthood provides us with an exciting platform upon which it is necessary to reflect, if we are to grasp our identity as a ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Pet. 2:9). The missional function of the priesthood cannot be reduced to words on a page, for in reality it is only realised by communities living out their priestly identity through meditation on the scriptures. I pray therefore that this research may aid the construction of this spiritual house, so that God’s greatness may be proclaimed (1 Pet. 2:5).

References

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