

61—THE LEVITES SHALL BE MINE

(Leviticus 6, 10; Numbers 3, 18; Deuteronomy 10)

Jehovah instructed Moses that the fire upon the altar in the outer court of the tabernacle was never to be extinguished.¹⁷ And Aaron and his sons were assigned to provide fuel for the flame and tend it as part of their priestly service. No sacrifice was to be offered to Jehovah except in this fire. And no incense was to be burned by the priest unless the fire came from this altar. Fire from any other source was considered “strange fire” and was unacceptable to God.

Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, apparently did not understand the importance of this instruction. And when they lit their censers, or incense burners, with strange fire, fire came down from heaven and slew them. Thus, at the cost of the lives of two of Jehovah’s priests, the difference between the holy and the unholy, between the clean and the unclean, became very clear.

Because Nadab and Abihu had no children, Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar were left alone to minister in the priest’s office. Their assigned tasks were many and exacting, and there was much required of them—much more than they could ever do by themselves. It would be impossible for them to do what was required when the tabernacle had to be moved with the camp.

When the need for more help in the priest’s office became evident, Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying, “Bring the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest, that they may help him. They shall care for the tabernacle and assist with the details of the priest’s office. They shall keep your charge and the charge of all the tabernacle, but if they come near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar, either they or you shall die.

“The entire tribe of Levi will I give to Aaron, and they shall wait on him in the priest’s office. They shall take charge of the tabernacle only, but responsibility for the sanctuary and the altar is charged to you and your sons. Any other person who comes near to these things shall be put to death.”

Jehovah continued: “I have chosen the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of the firstborn, and they shall be mine. They are mine because the firstborn are mine, both man and beast, and I sanctified them unto myself on the day that I smote the firstborn in the land of Egypt.”

Jehovah commanded Moses to count the males of Levi from one month old and upward. They were all counted; the descendants of Gershon numbered 7,500, the descendants of Kohath numbered 8,600, and the descendants of Merari numbered 6,200. Each family of Levi’s three sons was given specific assignments as directed by Jehovah.¹⁸

According to instructions given by Jehovah, the Levites were brought before the congregation of Israel, where they were cleansed and purified. They washed their clothes, shaved their bodies, and Aaron offered a young bullock as a sin offering for them.

Jehovah explained that the descendants of Levi were to have no inheritance of land with the other tribes in the promised land. Levi’s inheritance, instead, was to be Jehovah or service to Jehovah, and the tithes of the children of Israel were to provide their support. However, only those Levites between thirty and fifty years of age would serve actively in the tabernacle.¹⁹

When the camp of Israel moved and it became necessary to move the tabernacle, Aaron and his sons were charged to cover all of the holy things and to prepare them to be moved by the Levites. Jehovah did not want the Levites to touch that which was holy and die.

¹⁷ This instruction about the perpetual fire on the altar is in Leviticus 6:12–13. This obviously posed some difficulties when the tabernacle was disassembled and moved from one place to another. It appears that someone (some of the Levites) had to transport the fire.

¹⁸ The three men named here—Gershon, Kohath, and Merari—were the three sons of Levi and thus the nominal heads of the Levites. Kohath was the ancestor of Moses and Aaron. All of the priests, as descendants of Aaron, were Kohath’s descendants. Also, Kohath’s other descendants, the Kohathites, had superior standing among the Levites.

¹⁹ Some scriptures (see Numbers 8:24) say the Levites were to serve in the tabernacle from age 25 to 50.