

# What is the difference between a priest and a Levite?

August 28, 2004

## Question:

What is the difference between the priests and the Levites in the Old Testament?

## Answer:

Initially, God offered to make the entire nation of Israel a nation of priests. *"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel* (Exodus 19:5-6). From this holy nation, the firstborn was to be given to God in His service. *"Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine. ... And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you, that you shall set apart to the LORD all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the LORD'S. But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem"* (Exodus 13:2, 11-13).

From among all these servants of God, God chose Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests for the nation. *"Now take Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest, Aaron and Aaron's sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar"* (Exodus 28:1). *"And you shall gird them with sashes, Aaron and his sons, and put the hats on them. The priesthood shall be theirs for a perpetual statute. So you shall consecrate Aaron and his sons"* (Exodus 29:9).

Unfortunately, the Israelites rebelled and made a golden calf to worship while Moses was on Mount Sinai. Only the tribe of Levi stood faithful with Moses. *"Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies), then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, "Whoever is on the LORD'S side-come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him"* (Exodus 32:25-26). God blessed their dedication.

*"Consecrate yourselves today to the LORD, that He may bestow on you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother" (Exodus 32:29). In reward for their dedication, God replaced the firstborns with the tribe of Levi. "Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD" (Numbers 3:12-13). The Levites then took on the duty of serving God. "At that time the LORD separated the tribe of Levi to bear the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister to Him and to bless in His name, to this day" (Deuteronomy 10:8). That service included serving the priests. "And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the work for the children of Israel in the tabernacle of meeting, and to make atonement for the children of Israel, that there be no plague among the children of Israel when the children of Israel come near the sanctuary" (Numbers 8:19).*

What causes the confusion is that Aaron also descended from Levi. Since all priests descend from Aaron, all priests are Levites. Yet all Levites are not priests, but they do serve the priests. Hence, you find mention of the priests and the Levites together, such as *"And he gathered together all the leaders of Israel, with the priests and the Levites"* (I Chronicles 23:2). This is also why the Hebrew writer speaks of the Levitical priesthood -- all priests came from a subset of the tribe of Levi. *"Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron?"* (Hebrews 7:11).

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# Levite

**Levites** (/ˈliːvaɪt/ *LEE-vyte*; Hebrew: לֵוִי, romanized: *Ləvīyyīm*) or **Levi**<sup>[2]</sup> are Jewish males who claim patrilineal descent from the Tribe of Levi.<sup>[3]</sup> The Tribe of Levi descended from Levi, the third son of Jacob and Leah. The surname *Halevi*, which consists of the Hebrew definite article "הַ" *Ha-* ("the") plus *Levi* (Levite) is not conclusive regarding being a Levite; a titular use of **HaLevi** indicates being a Levite. The daughter of a Levite is a "*Bat Levi*" (*Bat* being Hebrew for "daughter").

The Tribe of Levi served particular religious duties for the Israelites and had political (administering cities of refuge) and educational responsibilities as well. In return, the landed tribes were expected to support the Levites with a tithe (Numbers 18:21–25 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Numbers%2018:21–25&version=nrsv>)), particularly the tithe known as the First tithe, *ma'aser rishon*. The Kohanim, a subset of the Levites, were the priests, who performed the work of holiness in the Temple. The Levites, referring to those who were not Kohanim, were specifically assigned to

- singing<sup>[4]</sup> and/or playing music in the Temple
- serving as guards
- carrying<sup>[5]</sup>

When Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan (Joshua 13:33 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Joshua+13:33&version=63>)), the Sons of Levi were the only Israelite tribe that received cities but were not allowed to be landowners "because the Lord the God of Israel Himself is their inheritance" (Deuteronomy 18:2 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+18:2&version=63>)).<sup>[6]</sup>

In modern times, Levites are integrated in Jewish communities, but keep a distinct status. There are estimated 300,000 Levites among Ashkenazi Jewish communities,<sup>[1]</sup> and a similar number among Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews combined. The total percentage of Levites among the wider Jewish population is about 4%.

## In contemporary Jewish practice

Today, Levites in Orthodox Judaism continue to have additional rights and obligations compared to lay people, although these responsibilities have diminished with the destruction of the Temple. For instance, Kohanim are eligible to be called to the Torah first, followed by the Levites. Levites also provide assistance to the Kohanim, particularly washing their hands, before the Kohanim recite the Priestly Blessing.<sup>[7][8]</sup>

## Levites

לויים

Total population
~500,000–600,000 worldwide <sup>[a]</sup>
Regions with significant populations
<span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span> Israel 240,000
<span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span> United States 200,000
<span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span> France 16,000
<span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span> Canada 12,000
Languages
Vernacular: <u>Hebrew</u> , <u>English</u> and numerous other languages in the <u>Jewish diaspora</u>
Historical: <u>Biblical Hebrew</u> , <u>Aramaic</u>
Religion
<u>Judaism</u> , <u>Samaritanism</u>
Related ethnic groups
other <u>Jews</u> , <u>Samaritans</u>
Levites are the descendants of the <u>Tribe of Levi</u> , one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Levites are integrated in Jewish and Samaritan communities, but keep a distinct status. There are estimated 300,000 Levites among Ashkenazi Jewish communities. <sup>[1]</sup> Total percentage of Levites among Jews is about 4%.

Since Levites (and Kohanim) are traditionally pledged to Divine service, there is no Pidyon HaBen (redemption of the firstborn) ceremony for:

- the son of a Kohen's or a Levite's daughter
- the son of a Kohen or a Levite.<sup>[9][10]</sup>

Orthodox Judaism believes in the eventual rebuilding of a Temple in Jerusalem and a resumption of the Levitical role. A small number of schools, primarily in Israel, train priests and Levites in their respective roles.<sup>[11]</sup>

Conservative Judaism—which believes in a restoration of the Temple as a house of worship and in some special role for Levites, although not the ancient sacrificial system as previously practised—recognizes Levites as having special status. Not all Conservative congregations call Kohanim and Levites to the first and second reading of the Torah, and many no longer perform rituals such as the Priestly Blessing and Pidyon HaBen in which *Kohanim* and Levites have a special role.

Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism do not observe the distinctions between Kohanim, Levites, and other Jews.

## Relationship with Kohanim

The Kohanim are traditionally believed and halachically required to be of direct patrilineal descent from the biblical Aaron of the Tribe of Levi. The origins of the name/term "Levy" in Hebrew remain unclear. Some hypotheses link this name with the Hebrew root *lwh*, the Aramaic root *lwy*, or the Arabic root *lwy*.

The noun *kohen* is used in the Torah to refer to priests, both Israelite and non-Israelite, such as the Israelite nation as a whole,<sup>[12]</sup> as well as the priests (Hebrew *kohanim*) of Baal. During the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem, Kohanim performed the daily and holiday (Yom Tov) duties of sacrificial offerings.

Today *kohanim* retain a lesser though somewhat distinct status within Judaism, and are bound by additional restrictions according to Orthodox Judaism. During the Priestly Blessing, the Levites traditionally wash the hands of the Kohanim prior to the blessing of the House of Israel.<sup>[13]</sup> ("A first-born son washes the Kohen's hands if there is no Levite".<sup>[14][15]</sup>)

## Bat Levi

In Orthodox Judaism, children of a Bat Levi, like those of a Bat-Kohen, regardless of the child's father's tribe or the mother's marital status, retain the traditional exemption for their children from the requirement of being redeemed through the Pidyon HaBen.<sup>[16]</sup>

Conservative Judaism permits a Bat Levi to perform essentially all the rituals a male Levi would perform, including being called to the Torah for the Levite aliyah in those Conservative synagogues which have both retained traditional tribal roles and modified traditional gender roles.<sup>[17]</sup> In Israel, Conservative/Masorti Judaism has not extended Torah honors either to a bat Kohen or to a bat Levi.<sup>[18]</sup>

## The Levites and the Holocaust

In 1938, with the outbreak of violence that would come to be known as Kristallnacht, American Orthodox rabbi Menachem HaKohen Risikoff wrote about the central role he saw for Priests and Levites in terms of Jewish and world responses, in worship, liturgy, and teshuva, repentance. In *The Priests and the Levites* (1940),<sup>[19]</sup> he stressed that members of these groups exist in the realm between history (below) and redemption (above), and must act in a unique way to help move others to prayer and action, and help bring an end to suffering. He wrote, "Today, we also are living through a time of flood, Not of water, but of a bright fire, which burns and turns Jewish life into ruin. We are now drowning in a flood of blood. ... Through the Kohanim and Levi'im help will come to all Israel."<sup>[20]</sup>

## **Levite population**

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### **Levite Y-chromosome studies**

A 2003 study of the Y-chromosome by Behar et al. pointed to multiple origins for Ashkenazi Levites, who comprise approximately 4% among the Ashkenazi Jews. It found that Haplogroup R1a1a (R-M17), uncommon in the Middle East or among Sephardic Jews, is present in over 50% of Ashkenazi Levites, while the rest of Ashkenazi Levites' paternal lineage is of certain Middle Eastern origin, including Y-chromosome haplogroups E3b, J2, F, R1b, K, I, Q, N and L.<sup>[21]</sup> Haplogroup R1a1a is found at the highest levels among people of Eastern European descent, with 50 to 65% among Sorbs, Poles, Russians, and Ukrainians.<sup>[22][23]</sup> In South Asia, R1a1a has often been observed with high frequency in a number of demographic groups, reaching over 70% in West Bengal Brahmins in India and among the Mohani people in Sindh, Pakistan.<sup>[24]</sup> Behar's data suggested a founding event, involving an 'introgression' of anywhere from one to fifty non-Jewish European men, occurring at a time close to the initial formation and settlement of the Ashkenazi community as a possible explanation.<sup>[21]</sup> As Nebel, Behar and Goldstein speculate:

although neither the NRY haplogroup composition of the majority of Ashkenazi Jews nor the microsatellite haplotype composition of the R1a1 haplogroup within Ashkenazi Levites is consistent with a major Khazar or other European origin, as has been speculated by some authors (Baron 1957; Dunlop 1967; Ben-Sasson 1976; Keys 1999), one cannot rule out the important contribution of a single or a few founders among contemporary Ashkenazi Levites."<sup>[25]</sup>

A 2013 paper by Siiri Rootsi et al. confirmed a Near or Middle Eastern origin for all Ashkenazi Levites, including the R1a Y-chromosome carriers, and refuted the Khazar hypothesis of Ashkenazi ancestry:

Previous Y-chromosome studies have demonstrated that Ashkenazi Levites, members of a paternally inherited Jewish Levite caste, display a distinctive founder event within R1a, the most prevalent Y-chromosome haplogroup in Eastern Europe. Here we report the analysis of 16 whole R1 sequences and show that a set of 19 unique nucleotide substitutions defines the Ashkenazi R1a lineage. While our survey of one of these, M582, in 2,834 R1a samples reveals its absence in 922 Eastern Europeans, we show it is present in all sampled R1a Ashkenazi Levites, as well as in 33.8% of other R1a Ashkenazi Jewish males and 5.9% of 303 R1a Near Eastern males, where it shows considerably higher diversity. Moreover, the M582 lineage also occurs at low frequencies in non-Ashkenazi Jewish populations. In contrast to the previously suggested Eastern European origin for Ashkenazi Levites, the current data are indicative of a geographic source of the Levite founder lineage in the Near East and its likely presence among pre-Diaspora Hebrews.<sup>[26]</sup>

In a later 2017 study Behar et al. revised their initially mitigated position, concluding that a "Middle Eastern origin of the Ashkenazi Levite lineage based on what was previously a relatively limited number of reported samples, can now be considered firmly validated", precisizing that a "rich variation of haplogroup R1a outside of Europe which is phylogenetically separate from the typically European R1a branches", referring to the R1a-Y2619 sub-clade.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Lineage

Having a last name of Levi or a related term does not necessarily mean a person is a Levite, and many well-known Levites do not have such last names.<sup>[28]</sup>

Levitical status is passed down in families from father<sup>[29]</sup> to child born from a Jewish mother, as part of a family's genealogical tradition. Tribal status of Levite is determined by patrilineal descent, so a child whose biological father is a Levite (in cases of adoption or artificial insemination, status is determined by the genetic father), is also considered a Levite. Jewish status is determined by matrilineal descent, thus conferring levitical status onto children requires both biological parents to be Israelites and the biological father to be a Levite.

Accordingly, there is currently no branch of Judaism that regards levitical status as conferrable by matrilineal descent. It is either conferrable patrilineally with a Jewish mother, in the traditional manner, or it does not exist and is not conferred at all.

## Levite surnames

Some Levites have adopted a related last name to signify their status. Because of diverse geographical locations, the names have several variations.<sup>[30][31]</sup>

- *Alouwi* – Arabic variant, of Sephardic origin
- *Aguiló* – surname to the Jews from Mallorca (Xuetes).
- *Bazes* – a Levite surname.
- *Benveniste* – a Sephardic Levite surname.<sup>[32][33]</sup>
- *Epstein* – one of the European lineages descended from Zerahiah Ha-Levi of Sepharad
- *HaLevi*, *Halevi* and *Halevy* – Hebrew language and all translate to "the *Levi*" or "the *Levite*".
- *Horowitz HaLevi*, or simply *Horowitz/Hurwitz/Gurvich/Gurevich* – a European Levite surname, tracing to Isaiah Horowitz HaLevi, a descendant of Zerahiah Ha-Levi of Sepharad
- *Lavi* – a common Levite surname
- *Leefsma* – Frisian surname.
- *Leevi* – Finnish variation.
- *Lev* – simplified Russian variation of *Levi*
- *Levai*, *Lévai* and *Lévay* – a Levitic surname, originally meaning "a person from Levice" but today it is used by Jews who were forced to change their name during the Holocaust.
- *Leven* – Swedish variation.
- *Levente* – Hungarian variation.
- *Lévi*, *Levi*, *Lévy* or *Levy* – Hebrew for "Levite", equally common in Ashkenasic and Sephardic groups.
- *Levian/Livian/Benlevi/Liviem* – Persian-Jewish variations.
- *Lević*, also *Levinić*, *Prelević* – Croatian or Serbian variations.

- *Levin* – Russian variation, also *Levine*, *Lavin* or *Lavine* (/ləˈviːn/, rhyming with "ravine", or in some cases further anglicised to /lɪˈvaɪn/, rhyming with "divine") and *Lewin* a Polish variation. Sometimes supplemented with German "thal" (valley) to *Levinthal* or *Leventhal* and -sohn and -son to *Levinson* or *Levinsohn* as a patronymic, and with Slavic -ski and -sky suffixes *Levinski*, *Levinsky*, *Lewinski* and *Lewinsky* (the "e" often replaced with "a" in German areas).
- *Levit*, also *Levitt* – typically from the Bessarabia region of Romania, Moldova and southern Ukraine.
- *Levita* – Elia Levita, an ancestor of David Cameron
- *Leviyev* – the Russified surname (adding the yev/ev) that many Bukharian Jews of Central Asia have. Sometimes spelled *Leviev* or even *Levaev*.
- *Lewi* or *Lewj* (Polish, *Levi* and *Levy*)
- *Lewicki* – Polish "of the Levites", also *Lewicka*, *Lewycka*, *Lewycki*, *Lewycky*, *Lewicky*, *Levicki*, *Levicky* (can also originate from placenames in Poland).
- *Lewita* – Polish *Levite* or *Levita* Latinized, with Slavic suffix -an/in *Lewitan*, *Levitan*, *Levitin*, *Lewitin*, *Lewitinn*, and with additional suffix -ski/sky *Levitanski*, *Lewitanski*, *Levitansky*, also *Lewitas*, *Levitas*, Lithuanian, Belarusian, *Leyva* Spanish Sephardic, also but rare *Lefite*, *Lafite*, *Lafitte*, of French Sephardic origin.<sup>[30]</sup>
- Variants from Yiddish *Leyvik*, a pet form of *Leyvi*: *Levitch* Ukrainian variant, also *Levicz*, *Levis*, *Levitz*, *Lewicz*, *Lewitz*, *Lewis*, and with -ski and -sky suffixes *Leviczky*, *Levitski*, *Levitsky*, *Lewitski* and *Lewitsky* ("e" and "s" often replaced with "a" and "z" in German areas).
- *Loewy*, *Löwi*, *Löwy* and *Loewe* German or Swiss variations (although the usual origin for these names is *Löwe*, the German word for "lion").<sup>[30]</sup>
- *Segal* – shortened "Segen Levi" (secondary Levite)
- *Urfali* or *Levi Urfali* (also *Levi Abud*, *Levi Aslan*, *Levi Hamami*) – an Urfalim community surname, which was mostly Levite in origin
- *Zemmel* – shortened "Zecher mi-Shevet Levi" (descendant of the Levite tribe)

## Modern Levites

The following are some Levites with non-Levite-like last names in modern times:

- Frank Gehry<sup>[34]</sup>
- Chaim Herzog<sup>[35]</sup>
- Norman Lear<sup>[36]</sup>

## See also

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- Kohen
- Samaritans
- Urfalim

## Explanatory footnotes

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^ Levites comprise a subgroup of about 4% of world Jewry.<sup>[37]</sup> Combined with Kohanim, who are also Levites, the subgroup forms roughly 8% of the Jewish population worldwide,<sup>[37]</sup> or about 1–1.1 million. Levites also comprise one of the four surviving families of Samaritans, where they serve the role of High

Priests due to the fact that the last Samaritan High Priest Cohanic family went extinct in the 17th century.<sup>[38]</sup>

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## Further reading

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## External links

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- Twenty-four places in tanach where the Kohanim are called Levi'im (<http://kehuna.org/about-kohanim/twenty-four-places-the-kohanim-are-called-leviim/>) – Kehuna.org

- [The Cohen-Levi Family Heritage \(http://www.cohen-levi.org/the\\_tribe/welcome\\_to\\_the\\_tribe.htm\)](http://www.cohen-levi.org/the_tribe/welcome_to_the_tribe.htm)
  - [LeviteDNA.org \(http://www.levitedna.org\)](http://www.levitedna.org) – website on R1a Ashkenazi Levites
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Retrieved from "<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Levite&oldid=1172759164>"

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# Tribe of Levi

According to the Bible, the **Tribe of Levi** is one of the tribes of Israel, traditionally descended from Levi, son of Jacob. The descendants of Aaron, who was the first *kohen gadol* (high priest) of Israel, were designated as the priestly class, the Kohanim.

The Tribe of Levi served particular religious duties for the Israelites and had political responsibilities as well. In return, the landed tribes were expected to give tithes to the Kohanim, the priests working in the Temple in Jerusalem, particularly the tithe known as the *Maaser Rishon*. The Levites who were not Kohanim played music in the Temple or served as guards. When Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan the Levites were the only Israelite tribe that received cities but were not allowed to be landowners, because "the Lord God of Israel is their inheritance, as he said to them" (Book of Joshua, Joshua 13:33 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Joshua%2013:33&version=nrsv>)). Some Biblical traditions point to the alien aspects of the Levites and their role as military troops. In this context the etymology linking the term Levi with the Mycenaean Greek term *la-wo* (the people / armed people) was proposed.<sup>[1]</sup>



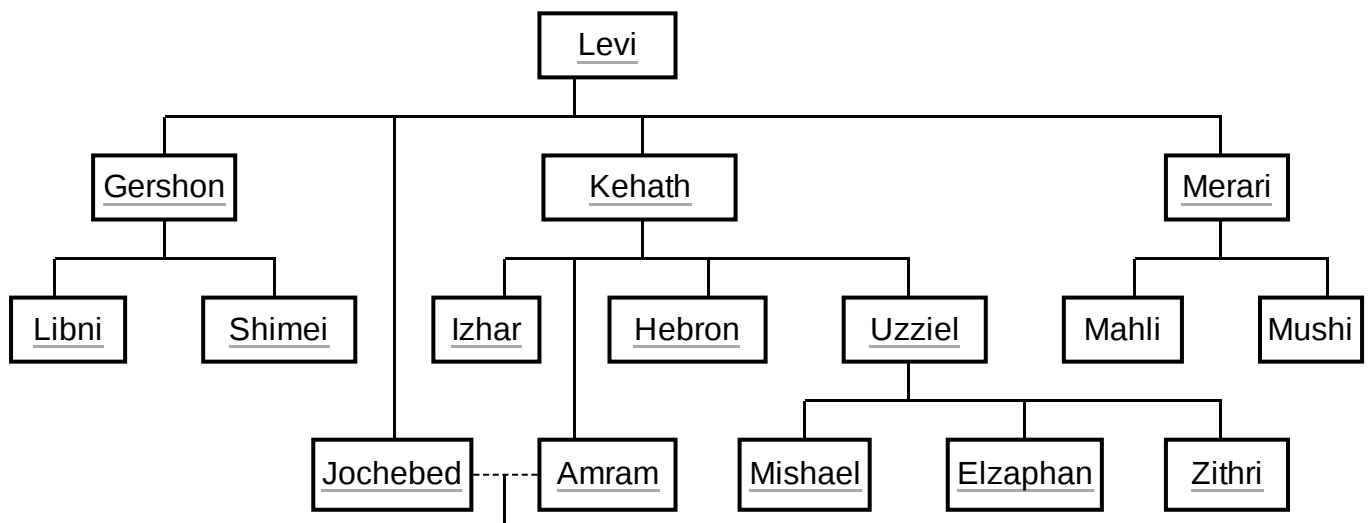
Levite reading the law to the Israelites (1873 drawing)

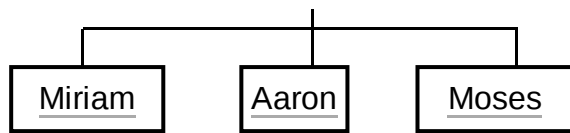
Notable descendants of the Levite lineage according to the Bible include Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Samuel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Ezra, and Malachi.

## In the Bible

### In the Torah

According to the Torah, the tribe is named after Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob (also called Israel). Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (Genesis 46:11 (<https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0146.htm#11>)). Levi also had a daughter named Jochebed (Exodus 6:20 (<https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0206.htm#20>)).





Kohath's son Amram was the father of Miriam, Aaron and Moses. The descendants of Aaron, the Kohanim, had the special role as priests in the Tabernacle in the wilderness and also in the Temple in Jerusalem. The remaining Levites were divided into three groups: Gershonites (descended from Gershon), Kohathites (from Kohath), and Merarites (from Merari). Each division filled different roles in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple services.

Levites' principal roles in the Temple included singing Psalms during Temple services, performing construction and maintenance for the Temple, serving as guards, and performing other services. Levites also served as teachers and judges, maintaining cities of refuge in biblical times. The Book of Ezra reports that the Levites were responsible for the construction of the Second Temple and also translated and explained the Torah when it was publicly read.

During the Exodus the Levite tribe were particularly zealous in protecting the Mosaic law in the face of those worshipping the golden calf, which may have been a reason for their priestly status.<sup>[2][3]</sup> Although the Levites were not counted in the census among the children of Israel, they were numbered separately as a special army.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the Book of Numbers the Levites were charged with ministering to the Kohanim and keeping watch over the Tabernacle:

<sup>2</sup> And with you bring your brother also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may join you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony.<sup>3</sup> They shall keep guard over you and over the whole tent, but shall not come near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar lest they, and you, die.<sup>4</sup> They shall join you and keep guard over the tent of meeting for all the service of the tent, and no outsider shall come near you.<sup>5</sup> And you shall keep guard over the sanctuary and over the altar, that there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel.<sup>6</sup> And behold, I have taken your brothers the Levites from among the people of Israel. They are a gift to you, given to the Lord, to do the service of the tent of meeting.



Illustration of the allotment of land to the Levites (Numbers 35:4–5)

Numbers 18:2–6 (ESV)

## In the Prophets





Map of the territory of Benjamin. Note the area around the cities allotted to the Levites, per Numbers 35:4–5

Jeremiah speaks of a covenant with the Kohanim and Levites, connecting it with the covenant with the seed of King David:

As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, neither the sand of the sea measured; so will I multiply the seed of David My servant, and the Levites that minister unto Me. And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying: 'Considerest thou not what this people have spoken, saying: The two families which the LORD did choose, He hath cast them off?

Jeremiah 33:22–24, Jewish Publication Society translation, 1917

The Book of Malachi also spoke of a covenant with Levi:

Know then that I have sent this commandment unto you, that My covenant might be with Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. My covenant was with him of life and peace, and I gave them to him, and of fear, and he feared Me, and was afraid of My name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and did turn many away from iniquity.

Malachi 2:4–6, Jewish Publication Society translation, 1917

Malachi connected a purification of the "sons of Levi" with the coming of God's messenger:

Behold, I send My messenger, and he shall clear the way before Me; and the Lord, whom ye seek, will suddenly come to His temple, and the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in, behold, he cometh, saith the LORD of hosts.

But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap;

And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver; and there shall be they that shall offer unto the LORD offerings in righteousness.

Malachi 3:1–3, Jewish Publication Society translation, 1917

## Criticism

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Critical scholars who follow the documentary hypothesis propose that those parts of the Torah attributed to the Elohists seem to treat *Levite* as a descriptive attribute for someone particularly suited to the priesthood, rather than as a firm designation of a tribe, and believe that Moses and Aaron are being portrayed as part of the Joseph group rather than being part of a tribe called *Levi*.<sup>[5]</sup> Jahwist passages have more ambiguous language; traditionally interpreted as referring to a person named *Levi*, they could also be interpreted as just referring to a social position titled *levi*.<sup>[5]</sup>

In the Blessing of Jacob, Levi is treated as a tribe, cursing them to become scattered; critics regard this as an aetiological postdiction to explain how a tribe could be so scattered, the simpler solution being that the priesthood was originally open to any tribe, but gradually became seen as a distinct tribe to themselves.<sup>[5][6]</sup> The Priestly source and the Blessing of Moses, which critical scholars view as originating centuries later, portray the Levites firmly established as a tribe, and as the only tribe with the right to become priests.

Aren M. Maier holds that it is very likely that priestly groups such as the Levites existed during the First Temple period, since the existence of cultic groups of that kind were very common within the ancient Near East.<sup>[7]</sup>

## See also

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- House of Lévis
- Tribe of Joseph

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