

The Levitical Priesthood, a Study in Social Development.

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THE evidences as to the development of the Levitical priesthood may be classified under the following general heads :

(a) The statements of writers who, as themselves belonging to the institution in question, may be supposed to have investigated its history with special zeal and to have had special sources of information, but who because of their special interest must be received with caution as liable to exaggeration and favoritism.

(b) Material formulated by non-Levitical writers, who cannot be suspected of partiality for the institution, but on the contrary may have been too indifferent to it to do it justice, or even have been prejudiced against it (*e.g.* Deut. 33¹⁰).

(c) Ancient songs in which the institution is overlooked or ignored (Jud. 5), regarded adversely (Gen. 49), or interceded for (Deut. 33). Historical location having been found for these songs, chronologically and geographically, by their own internal evidence, they may then be used to indicate the standing of the institution at the period in question.

(d) Historical situations where the institution might be expected to appear, but by implication does not exist.

The origin of an institution is often best arrived at by tracing the evidences backward step by step, thus working from the known to the unknown. There can be no question that in post-exilic times there was a Levitical order, complete in organization, strong in authority, having a large body of literature of its own, making and observing an elaborate ritual. What the institution was in the time of Moses, or whether it then existed at all, is one object of our inquiry. For it is in this early period that the non-Levitical evidence differs most widely from Levitical statements.

The most difficult portion of the inquiry, so far as estimating the

value of the testimony is concerned, lies in the later middle period, where the character of the institution is approximating to its final stage, and where therefore the Levitical testimony, while not more reliable in spirit, is necessarily less at variance with the facts and therefore less easily detected in error by any variance from non-Levitical evidence.

Following mainly the non-Levitical evidences for the earliest period, as giving results more in accord with the general laws of social evolution, and presenting it in the direct chronological order, we may treat the development in five stages of somewhat indefinite demarcation.

I. Among the clans of Hebrew stock was one known as the *bene Levi* (Ex. 32^{26, 28} [E]) characterized by a more warlike disposition than their fellow-clans (Gen. 49⁵⁻⁷ [J]), a peculiar conservatism in regard to foreign alliances (Gen. 34²⁵ [J]), and a more zealous devotion to the new Jahweh theology taught by their great fellow-clansman Moses (Ex. 32²⁶⁻²⁸ [E]). Their military spirit made them among the first to enter on the conquest of Canaan, where their extreme conservatism involved them in peculiar difficulties. Together with the *bene Shim'on* they rejected all overtures of alliance and resisted the tendencies to amalgamation with the Canaanites. While the other clans, acknowledging their weakness before the enwalled towns, accepted the situation and contented themselves with occupying the outlying country in a semi-nomadic mode of life, waiting for time and the growth of friendly relations or the more rapid numerical increase of country populations to give them an entrance to the cities and eventual possession (Jud. 1^{21, 27-33} [J]), the *bene Levi* and the *bene Shim'on* attempted from the first to exterminate the urban populations (Gen. 34 [J]'s narrative = vv. 23 *partim*. 30, 31]). Though temporarily successful in their attack upon Shechem, they were in the end so broken in the struggle that they lost their clan organization, and the survivors, having delayed too long in settling down to agricultural pursuits, found themselves without territorial allotment or industrial occupation and compelled to seek a precarious living (Jud. 17^{6a, 9b} [J]) among the other clans, who disapproved of their violence as likely to hinder a peaceable occupation of the land by involving them all in a blood feud (Gen. 34^{30, 31} 49⁵⁻⁷ [J]). The dispersion of the *bene Levi*, which the Levitical writers would have us believe was a special honor conferred on them as the chosen priest tribe of Jahweh (Deut. 10^{8, 9} Num. 35¹⁻⁸ [P] Ezek. 44²⁸), is explained by J on a sociologically much more probable ground as a social ban, a natural and just penalty for their illiberal and unsocial disposition. Shechem recovered from

their assault and in time accepted amalgamation with a branch of the *bene Joseph* (Jud. 6¹³ 8^{31, 33}), though not without strong opposition from a remnant of the older and more conservative portion of the original population who kept in memory their treatment by the *bene Levi* and *bene Shim'on* (Jud. 9²⁸ [J]).

II. Up to this time there is no priestly character attaching to the Levites as such. But with the change in their material fortunes, there comes a change in their disposition, or rather an emphasis of one trait, the religious, and the loss of another, the military; just as a man on the loss of his eyesight is apt to acquire an extra sensitiveness of touch and hearing. Out of the clan's composite of characteristics that had found its supreme expression in the all-round character of Moses, the religious trait emerges, now that the exercise of military qualities is no longer possible. The individual Levite without territorial allotment or military occupation must now make his living by his brains, and takes to cultivating religious functions. A few of the clan constituting its original patriarchal priesthood already have an occupation as custodians of the tribal or national palladium, the ark, at Shiloh; but the rest must find a place where they can.

For such a change in disposition and occupation, we have a sociological analogy in the Jews of the dispersion, who from being predominantly agricultural became under changed conditions preëminently the commercial and financial people of the world. Their latent capacity for finance is recognized as early as the times of Gehazi (2 K. 5³⁰) and Amos (8^{5, 6}), but it needed the Exile to develop it fully. In the period of the Judges, the Levite, while retaining the clan name, is looked upon rather as a professional character, a journeyman hierophant (Jud. 17⁶), though having as yet little sense of professional solidarity. Our closer analogy here is in the great number of Jews that in Roman times be-took themselves to exorcism and sorcery as a profession (Matt. 12^{27, 8} Acts 8⁹ 13⁶ 19¹³). The Levite now cultivates a professional intonation by which he is readily recognized by strangers as a Levite (Jud. 18³ [E]). He is regarded as more acceptable to the deity in priestly service than the patriarchal priest-father or his deputy, the eldest son (Jud. 17¹³ [J]). This perhaps indicates a waning among the Hebrews of the more primitive religious ideas connected with ancestor worship or teraphim (Jud. 17⁵ [J] Gen. 31^{19, 3} [E]) and a growing appreciation of nature gods, of whom Jahweh, the god of Moses, was coming to be the most important (Jud. 5^{4, 5} [J] Deut. 33² Ex. 19¹⁶⁻¹⁸ [E] 15¹⁻¹⁸ 6³ [P] 32 [E], De Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, Bk. III. ch. ii.). The Danites as well as the Ephraimite Micah value the Levite as a medium

of divine communication (Jud. 18⁵ [J]) and a valuable acquisition as priest-father to a clan (v. 19 [J]). He is ready to go wherever he can find employment and is glad of promotion to a larger field of usefulness (v. 20 [J]). But the old patriarchal or family priesthood is still in vogue and sacrifice is not yet thought of as exclusively the prerogative of Levitical priests (Jud. 6¹⁹ 13¹⁹ 17⁵ [J] 6²⁵⁻²⁷ [E²] 11^{31, 39} [E]).

The absence of any mention of Levi in the Song of Deborah (Jud. 5) is noticeable. It might be accounted for on the ground that Levi was a priest tribe, were it not that Simeon also is omitted; and if both omissions are explained by the scattered condition of those clans, the silence as to Judah also requires to be explained on some other ground; but this would carry us beyond our present purpose.

III. The third stage in Levitical development begins with Samuel. Here perhaps we should be on our guard against a possible Levitical coloring of the evidences by the compiler. The narrative of Samuel's relation to Saul has been resolved into three or four documentary strata, as by Wellhausen, *Geschichte Israels* (1878), vol. i. pp. 256-258. However that may be, it is generally agreed that one characteristic feature of the time is the appearing of religious personages in companies, indicating an incipient sense of professional solidarity (1 Sam. 10^{5, 10}), a movement attributed to the influence of Samuel. Between the patriarchal priests of the primitive system, presiding over mutually exclusive family mysteries, there could of course be no recognition of fellowship (De Coulanges, *Anc. City*, Bk. I. ch. iv.); but when priests had come to let themselves out for hire wherever they could get the most pay, there would inevitably soon arise a sense of professionalism drawing them together by other than family ties.

The story of Samuel's rupture with Saul may be, as some think, a late invention to account for and justify the subsequent failure of Saul's house and to exalt the priesthood; yet it is sociologically most probable that such a rupture took place. Samuel and Saul were in personal character the Thomas à Becket and Henry II. of their day, or the Pope and Henry VIII. Saul might be called in some sense a Defender of the Faith. He was devoutly religious, intolerant of witchcraft (1 Sam. 28^{3b}), observant of the new moons (20²⁷), scrupulous against eating meat with the blood (14³³), sternly impartial in performance of oaths and vows (14^{24, 39, 44}), and susceptible to the influence of religious company and occasions (10¹⁰⁻¹³ 19^{21, 24}). In his earlier years he was deferential to Samuel as the older man and the one to whom in part he owed his crown (13⁸ 15^{24, 25}). Nevertheless, he would brook no interference from priests (14¹⁹), and on occasion could massacre an

entire village of them (22¹⁸); so that even Samuel stood in fear of him (16²), felt that he had made a mistake in selecting him, secretly anointed David and waited, for the time had not come when priestly functions could be appropriated by any one individual or by a professional class. Saul was standing on the ancient right of patriarchal and military leadership to officiate at sacrifices.

The period of Samuel and Saul, commonly regarded as the beginning of the Hebrew monarchy, may quite as properly be spoken of as the beginning of the *Church*, using the word in its hierarchal sense; for at this point begins the actual differentiation of Church and State out of the previous composite of religious and civil authority popularly known as the Theocracy. Here, too, begins the quarrel between Church and State, which breaks out at intervals through the following centuries with the balance generally in favor of the State, till the Church survives the downfall of the monarchy, and the two authorities are eventually again united in the Maccabean princes (1 Macc. 14⁴¹).

The Levitical historians claim Samuel as a Levite (1 Chron. 6³³⁻³⁸), but note the disjointed setting of v.²⁸ and the absence of any implication to that effect in 1 Sam. 1, where the family from Ramah, a town not listed among the Levitical cities of Josh. 21, come to Shiloh once a year as ordinary worshippers. But whatever be Samuel's descent, his claiming the functions of priesthood exclusively for himself or for a religious order, ineffectual though it was at the time, tended to exalt the sacred profession, and with it its representatives the Levites, and to promote still further their sense of professional solidarity. It is somewhat later than this probably that we must date the so-called Blessing of Moses (Deut. 33). The author of this poem regards the Levites as of untraced descent and unaffiliated as coördinates with the other clans (v.⁹, cf. Heb. 7⁹) and as specially equipped for giving oracular responses and for teaching (vv.⁸⁻¹⁰), but there are still in the nation those who refuse them the recognition due them (v.¹¹). The rivalry between the new order of religious functionaries and the old is becoming more sharply defined. The Levite is forging to the front and has his advocates among the song-makers of the nation, but has much yet to do to establish his preëminence. In speaking of this poem, which by its internal evidence seems to belong to the northern kingdom after the disruption, we have used by anticipation material belonging to the next stage.

IV. The fourth stage of the development is marked by royal patronage and supervision, and begins with David. This royal favor continues after the disruption only in the southern kingdom, the north-

ern kings continuing, or reverting to, the earlier system (1 K. 12³¹); under which, however, many individual Levites doubtless found employment as before (Ezek. 44¹⁰).

In the southern kingdom, the king, as in Saul's time, still maintained his right of leadership in religious functions (2 Sam. 6^{13, 14} 1 K. 3¹⁵), and there was no one of such commanding personality as Samuel to contest his right; but he honored the Levites, and, under the growing cares of state and the increasing demand of the temple service, he was obliged to delegate to them more and more the actual performance of the rites; not failing, however, to remind them from time to time, by deposing a priest (1 K. 2^{20, 27}), or putting one to death (2 Chron. 24²¹), that the Church is still subordinate to the State. Nevertheless, under royal patronage, even with such limitations, the power of the priesthood grew; and it is significant of this growth that, whereas Solomon could depose Abiathar by a simple judicial fiat, Joash had to resort to conspiracy and mob-violence to rid himself of Zechariah ben Jehoiadah's interference. Under Uzziah, a stronger king than Joash, the priests successfully withstood the king's attempt to assert in a test case his ancient right to offer incense in the temple (2 Chron. 26¹⁷⁻²⁰; cf. 1 K. 3³ 12^{30a}). For, though we may question the chronicler's view that Uzziah's leprosy was a consequence of his sacrilege, it is easy to believe that there was a contest of authority resulting in the king's defeat which the hierarchy made the most of as a warning to later rulers. Within little more than a century, the priests, — the Levites, — with the aid of the prophets, were able to effect the centralization of sacrificial worship at Jerusalem, by which a stronger organization of the priesthood became possible; and now the priest-prophet (Jer. 33¹⁷⁻²²) ventured to regard the Levitical priesthood as coördinate with the monarchy in the enjoyment of a divine promise of perpetuity. The downfall of the monarchy soon left the priesthood in undisputed possession of the field.

V. The remaining step in the development was a process of ecclesiastical refinement within the body, by which a distinction in holiness was made between those who had remained faithful in times of apostasy and those who had yielded to the temptation to make a living at heathen altars, in disregard of the principle of the central sanctuary. Ample provision had been made in the Deuteronomic legislation (Deut. 18⁶⁻⁸) for all such as would come to Jerusalem, but many had failed to come up to these latest and most advanced conceptions of Jahweh's character and requirements. The question as

to their proper treatment by the faithful, first dealt with by Ezekiel in anticipation of the re-institution of temple service (Ezek. 44¹⁰⁻¹⁶ 48¹¹), is the Old Testament counterpart of the Novatian and Donatist controversies as to the proper attitude of the New Testament Church toward the repentant *libellatici*, and was settled by a compromise, in which the Zadokite priests, "that went not astray," reserved for themselves the higher offices, but allowed the others — henceforth to be known as mere Levites in distinction from priests — a menial position in the temple ministrations, with the privilege of partial support out of the sacrificial offerings.

The growing sense of solidarity among the Levites, from the time of Samuel onward, showed itself in a tendency to aggregation in certain localities, — a tendency seen in social classes of every kind in every age. An early trace of this tendency is seen in the priest city of Nob (1 Sam. 22¹⁹), not included in the post-exilic list of Josh. 21 (P). In many cities the Levitical element at length dominated, or even crowded out all others, to such an extent that they became known as Levitical cities. At what period the process was so far accomplished that the method of it could be forgotten and the *status quo* could be attributed to Moses cannot be definitely stated; but it must have been after the legislation of D and before that of P, and, probably, not till post-exilic times. In D the Levites appear as objects of charity, along with the poor, the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger, and seem to be distributed throughout the community as pervasively as son and daughter, man-servant and maid-servant (Deut. 14²⁷⁻²⁹ 18¹⁻³), a sort of mendicant friars or dervishes, except when they attach themselves to some sanctuary. This, perhaps, accounts in part for the Levites' lack of interest in the projected return from Babylon (Ezra 8¹³).

The primitive system of land tenure in Israel, according to which land when alienated must revert periodically to the original family, gave few openings for the landless Levites to acquire agricultural foothold. Nevertheless, they did secure such properties. Abiathar, driven by Saul from Nob (1 Sam. 22²⁰), is found in his old age possessed of fields at Anathoth (1 K. 2²⁰). The legislation of D recognizes that a Levite may have proceeds from the sale of his patrimony (Deut. 18⁸), presumably referring to real estate. Jeremiah purchases a field of his cousin in Anathoth (Jer. 32⁶⁻¹³). In the breaking down of the primitive system of land tenure (1 K. 21⁴), under the increasing civilization of the times of Jeroboam II. and Uzziah, when the wealthy nobles acquired vast estates by foreclosure of mortgages on

the peasant proprietors (Am. 2⁷ Is. 5⁸ Mic. 2²⁻⁹), the priests found means to enrich themselves (Am. 2⁸ Hos. 5¹ 6⁹), and may also have acquired landed possessions. When, moreover, the exiles returned from Babylon, it was possible to assign to the Levites generous allotments, not on Ezekiel's ideal plan of a broad, geometrical strip of territory (Ezek. 48¹³), for there were yet in the land many of the peasantry, who would have to be evicted for such a purpose; but the cities were more available, for the Babylonian policy of deportation, by removing especially the nobility and the craftsmen, had accomplished here a more complete depopulation than in the rural districts (2 K. 25¹²). The legislation of P (Lev. 25²³⁻³⁴), while retaining the old system of reversion for agricultural lands, allowed the transfer of city properties with only a year's right of redemption; but made an exception here in favor of the Levite, who might redeem at any time (v.³³). If Naboth's vineyard was actually in the city of Jezreel, as seems to be implied in 1 K. 21¹, this distinction between urban and rural properties had not yet arisen in the times of Ahab.

A new feature in the post-exilic legislation, and one that always accompanies priestly ascendancy, is the provision legalizing religious endowments, corresponding to what the Moslems call *waqf* (Lev. 27²⁰⁻²¹), whose abuse was rebuked by Jesus (Mk. 7¹¹), and has called for restrictive legislation ever since. In this and other ways the Levites secured in time a recognized title to as many as forty-eight cities, numbering among them some of the choicest bits of property in Palestine, such as Hebron, Bethshemesh, Shechem, En Gannim, and Taanach.

It needed the catastrophe of the Babylonian exile to complete the removal of the social ban that had fallen on the Levites in the times of the Judges, and to crown with success their long struggle for reinstatement as the leading social force in the nation. When this ascendancy was at length firmly secured, it became possible for Levitical writers to set forth an account of the origin of the Levitical priesthood as different from that implied by J and E as the Roman Catholic explanation of the origin of the Papacy is different from that given by early church historians.