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PENTATEUCH EXEGESIS

Pericope: Leviticus 8

Rebekah Walsh

Pericope: Leviticus 8

Chapter 8 of Leviticus details the first ordination of “Aaron and his sons”¹ and the institution of the Levitical ordination rites. The object of the rite is made explicit as ordination for the purpose of the atonement of the sins of the Levites themselves and the people.² This exegesis will argue that the selection and consecration of the Levites followed a process of divine and human preparation. The office of priesthood which is “conferred” on them,³ is a purpose and responsibility which they themselves undertake as a tribe, choosing to “wholly follow the Lord.”⁴ The Levites simultaneously assume this role by choosing to be set apart⁵ as a response of dedication and obedience to this divine call. They are subsequently appointed to atone for their own sin and guilt, and that of the people of Israel. This responsibility then becomes a role of mediation between God and Israel.⁶ It seems that the significance of ordination, is that it is the moment in which the Lord “fills” the Levite priests with the ministry of their office. This consecration and subsequent filling of “Aaron and his sons,”⁷ as priests for the Lord, occurs through the carrying out of the rite of ordination. It transforms them, and offers them a new active call to holiness.⁸ The transformation that this new office causes is a notable example of God’s mercy and faithfulness to his people,⁹ to whom he offers a means of atonement for sin and the possibility of holiness for the people.¹⁰

¹ Lev 8:2, Revised Standard Version henceforth.

² Lev 8:33-34.

³ University of Navarre, *The Pentateuch* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 445.

⁴ Ex 32:29; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2015), 570.

⁵ Ex 32:29; John R. Kohlenberger, *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zonderman Publishing House, 1998), 240.

⁶ Lev 4:20-21; Scott Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 536.

⁷ Lev 8:2.

⁸ Lev 21:7-8.

⁹ Ex 34:6-7.

¹⁰ Lev 20: 22,24,26.

The introductory verse establishes the key elements of the rite,¹¹ which are, over the course of the chapter, carried out according to the instructions Moses receives from God on Mt Sinai in Exodus 28 and 29.¹² This first instruction begs the question, why is it that “Aaron and his sons,” are brought forward as the men selected for ordination?¹³ During this revelation on Mt Sinai, the Lord gives the specific instructions regarding the selection of Aaron and his sons, the requirements for the vestments and the sequence of the ordination rite, including the sacrifices and consecration of the men. No explicit reason is offered for their selection,¹⁴ however an answer to this question is indicated in the event of the idolatry of the golden calf, Israel’s apostasy which was committed in Exodus 32.¹⁵ Aaron is held responsible by Moses for having “brought a great sin upon” the people of Israel, having permitted and facilitated the making of the calf to be “worshipped and sacrificed to,” instead of God.¹⁶ Moreover, the serious effect of this sin was not diminished despite Moses’ intercession for Israel as a nation, which remits their total destruction.¹⁷

The ramifications of the guilt of this offence, that “the people had broken loose,” and separated themselves from the covenant which God had only just established, results in a severe penalty.¹⁸ Moses, called to the Israelites, “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me.” The “sons of Levi” referred to collectively, are the only ones to respond with the obedience that was required of Israel in the first place.¹⁹ It is through their obedience that they become “mediators” like Moses,²⁰ since they place themselves in the position to hear the instruction of the Lord, and subsequently to carry out, through their obedience the required penalty for the offence of Israel.²¹ This action of obedience and loyalty to God sets an important precedent, which Moses recognises, saying, “Today you have *ordained* yourselves for the service of the Lord...”²² The

¹¹ Lev 8:1-3; “Take Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments, and the anointing oil, and the bull of the sin offering, and the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble all the congregation at the door of the tent of meeting.”

¹² Ex 25:1-31:18.

¹³ Lev 8:2; Ex 2:1; 4:14.

¹⁴ Ex 28:1- 30:33.

¹⁵ Ex 32:1-14; University of Navarre, *The Pentateuch*, 377.

¹⁶ Ex 32:15-24.

¹⁷ Ex 32: 11-14.

¹⁸ Ex 32:25; University of Navarre, *The Pentateuch*, 378; Moses had only just interceded for the people so that God would not destroy them; Ex 32:7-10.

¹⁹ Ex 32:26; University of Navarre, *The Pentateuch*, 381.

²⁰ Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 536.

²¹ Ex 32:26.

²² Ex 32:29; (emphasis mine).

word “ordained” is the RSV translation in this verse of the word מִלְּאֵוּ (mil·’ū) in Hebrew which literally means “they-set-apart” or “consecrate.”²³ Variations of the same word are later used in Leviticus 8 to announce the completion of the ordination rite.²⁴

The word מִלְּאֵוּ (mil·’ū) is the “qal” form of the word מָלֵא (male) meaning, “to fill.”²⁵ In the moment of consecration, the Levites have essentially “set [themselves] apart,” “for the service of the Lord,”²⁶ but this choice has also already been preceded by their definitive and irrevocable choice for obedience to the Lord’s command in Exodus 32. The choice of this consecration, in which Aaron and his sons offer themselves to the Lord, gains for them the opportunity to be “filled” in a specific way. The consecration paves the way for them to be filled. In this instance the use of the word indicates that their hands are filled with something. Whilst the substance of this filling is not stipulated, in the context of the passage it can be read that their hands have been “filled” with the task of exercising a divine justice.²⁷

This occurrence in Exodus 32 sets a precedent for the use of the word “ordination,” in Leviticus 8. It only occurs twice in reference to Aaron and his sons, and in two forms,²⁸ both occurring in the same verse.²⁹ In the first case, the use of the word מִלְּאֵוּ (mil·lu·’ê·kēm) announces the conclusion and “completion” of the rite, which is additionally emphasised by the duration of the ceremony, of seven days and nights; the scriptural number of completion. It thus requires the participation of the Aaron and his sons in the rite for the “ordination” to be fulfilled. The word מִלְּאֵוּ (mil·lu·’ê·kēm) is noticeably, another form of the same word as that which is used in Exodus 32 to describe the choice which the Levites made for themselves, מִלְּאֵוּ (mil·’ū).³⁰ In this context, Aaron and his sons have simply completed “the days of [their] ordination.”³¹ It marks the moment at which the office they are to receive is actually conferred.

²³ Kohlenberger, *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament*, 240; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 570.

²⁴ Lev 8:33.

²⁵ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 569-570; When the word מִלְּאֵוּ (mil·’ū) is used in the context of the verse, מִלְּאֵוּ יָדְכֶם לַיהוָה the literal meaning translates as “fill the hand.”

²⁶ Ex 32:29; Kohlenberger, *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament*, 240.

²⁷ Ex 32:27-29.

²⁸ Lev 8:22,28,29,31; This does not include the times it is used to specify the purpose of the sacrifices that are offered during the process of the rite, which are called “consecration” or “ordination” offerings.”

²⁹ Lev 8:33; Kohlenberger, *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament*, 289.

³⁰ Ex 32:29; Lev 8:33; Kohlenberger, *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament*, 240, 289.

³¹ Lev 8:33.

well as a divine remedy for Israel's situation. Aaron in particular, who was responsible for the sin brought on Israel,³⁹ is made the first high priest, through the anointing with oil. "The pouring of the oil over the head of the high priest so that it flows down into his beard, showed the fullness of priesthood was being conferred on him."⁴⁰ Of course the office is not a reward but a reversal of the previous disorder which instead "fills" Aaron and his sons. Although they make the choice to "wholly follow" the Lord, they still carry the weight of Aaron's sin,⁴¹ and its subsequent responsibility. Aaron, as the high priest, and the successive high priests, are given the fullness of this responsibility to make atonement, firstly for themselves, because the weight of the priest's sin is such that it "brings guilt on the people," and then for the people of Israel.⁴² The high priest, who succeeds Aaron's office bears an even greater responsibility for holiness, and must remain both ritually pure, and free from any defilement, because of his consecration and the office imposed on him.⁴³

These two key elements of consecration and the "filling" of the priest with the anointing for their office are necessarily integrated in the process of ordination. If we return to the point in Leviticus 8 when "Moses brought Aaron and his sons,"⁴⁴ the word for "brought" וַיִּקְרַב (way·yaq·rêḇ) is used in reference to Aaron and his sons, at three significant points in the pericope. They are "brought" to be washed, to be clothed in the vestments, and to be anointed with the blood of the sacrifices.⁴⁵ Interestingly, the same word וַיִּקְרַב (way·yaq·rêḇ) is used to mark the presenting of the rams "brought" for the sacrifice⁴⁶ of the burnt offering, and the wave offering (for consecration).⁴⁷

The double application of the word creates a parallel between Aaron and his sons and the rams that are to be offered in sacrifice. This comparison may even be extended to the first sacrifice, which is a sin offering.⁴⁸ Though the action of presentation is not in this case the same,

³⁹ Ex 32:15-24.

⁴⁰ Lev 8:12; Ps 133:2; University of Navarre, *Pentateuch*, 445.

⁴¹ Ex 32:29; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 570.

⁴² Ex 32:15-24; Lev 4:3-21

⁴³ Lev 21:10-15

⁴⁴ Lev 8:2

⁴⁵ Lv 8:6,13,24; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 898.

⁴⁶ Lev 8:18, 22; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 898.

⁴⁷ Lev 8:27; University of Navarre, *Pentateuch* 447.

⁴⁸ Lev 8:14.

the washing of the Levites is immediately reminiscent of the washing of a sacrificial victim.⁴⁹ The parallel extends to the purpose which each action in the rite fulfils. The significance of the consecration which the Levitical priests are to undertake, is that they themselves are given sacrificially, which can be seen in the key elements of the rite. The sin offering serves to cleanse through expiation and atonement,⁵⁰ the sins of the priest and the people. The imposition of the Levite's hands on the head of the animal "signifies that the animal takes the place of the offerer."⁵¹ Comparatively, the liturgical washing of Aaron and his sons is the symbol of the necessary ritual purity for the office being conferred on them.

The burnt offering and consecration offerings are even more explicit. The sacrifice of the burnt offering, "an offering by fire to the Lord,"⁵² symbolises "man's desire to be one with God" who "has dominion over all things."⁵³ The offering of self and submission to God, which is required by their consecration is visibly marked in the rite of ordination by their investiture. The vestments or the priestly garments of Aaron and his sons become the visible external sign of their consecration. The garments set them apart, firstly by design, since their design was by God's specific instruction.⁵⁴ Each article of clothing held a designated purpose, which to assist the priest in their office, or witness to their role. The wealth of the vestments and the skill with which they were made showed the importance of liturgical worship;⁵⁵ the turban was marked with the words "Holy to the Lord,"⁵⁶ explicitly designating the purpose of the consecration as sanctity. This designation, denoted the "expiatory role" of the high priest since the purpose of this holiness for which the priest was set aside, was to be understood as specifically linked to their duty to "offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people."⁵⁷ The ramifications of this consecration are that the high priest by virtue of his office and ordination, is sanctified by God.⁵⁸ This requirement of holiness is made of each priest, and especially the high priest, since "the closer a person is to God, the greater the requirement of cleanness and

⁴⁹ Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, 57; "Since *qrb* Hiphil is so often used in reference to offering sacrifice, its use here with reference to Aaron and his sons may have an overtone of sacrificial offering." (emphasis original)

⁵⁰ Lev 4:20; University of Navarre, *Pentateuch* 428.

⁵¹ Lev 8:14,18,22; University of Navarre, *Pentateuch* 422.

⁵² Lev 8:21.

⁵³ University of Navarre, *Pentateuch* 421.

⁵⁴ Ex 28:1-43.

⁵⁵ University of Navarre, *Pentateuch* 360.

⁵⁶ Ex 28:36.

⁵⁷ Heb 5:3; University of Navarre, *Pentateuch* 364.

⁵⁸ Lev 21:15,23; 22:9,16.

holiness.”⁵⁹ Their actions would bear immediate consequences for the people of Israel and any defilement which was brought upon the priest would defile the people, contrary to the task he has been given, to mediate for the people who have been set apart for God.⁶⁰ The garments themselves reveal the priest’s responsibility for the people before God, since the names of the twelve tribes are engraved on the stones of the ephod, which would be “upon [his] heart before the Lord continually.”⁶¹ The ordination rites effectively bind the priest to the people of Israel and to the service of God in the same way that these vestments are bound to the priest.⁶²

Finally the wave, or consecration offering parallels the anointing which is the specific act of consecration. “The purpose of the anointing is to set the person or object apart for the service of the Lord.” It was “the anointing and not the oil” which signified that the person was “chosen by the Lord.”⁶³ On the third occasion of Aaron and his sons being brought, they are anointed with the blood of the consecration sacrifice. The blood which is marked on their bodies is the second anointing after the oil.⁶⁴ Immediately after this action the entrails and vital organs of the sacrifice are placed in the hands of the Levites.⁶⁵ The symbolism shows definitively that the hands of Aaron and his sons are filled, quite literally to overflowing, with the sacrifice which is the responsibility of their new office and conferred on them by anointing with oil and with blood. “In the outward actions of the [rite of ordination] the power of the divine blessing is communicated to the actual mode of [the Levite’s] existence. The sacred action becomes a sacrament.”⁶⁶

The final phrase of Leviticus 8 is a recognition of the obedience of Aaron and his sons to the command of the Lord.⁶⁷ They humanly completed the actions of the rite, according to the instructions given to them. But these human actions, even the choice of the Levites to wholly follow the Lord,⁶⁸ is a response to the transformative purpose which has been instilled in them,

⁵⁹ Lev 21:1-24, University of Navarre, *Pentateuch* 490.

⁶⁰ Lev 20:22-26.

⁶¹ Ex 28:30.

⁶² Lev 8:7,13.

⁶³ Lev 8:10-12,30; Leander E. Keck et al., eds., *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1061.

⁶⁴ Lev 8:23; “Moses... took some of its blood and put it on the tip of Aaron’s right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the great toe of his right foot.” Lev 8:13.

⁶⁵ Lev 8:25-27.

⁶⁶ “Introduction” in J. W. Kleinig, *Leviticus (Concordia Commentary)*, (St Louis: Concordia, 2003) 23.

⁶⁷ Lev 8:36; “And Aaron and his sons did all the things which the Lord commanded Moses.”

⁶⁸ Ex 32:29; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 570.

by the overflowing completion of ordination that God pours into them.⁶⁹ The transformation that this new office brings about a notable example of God’s mercy and faithfulness both to Aaron and his sons, and to the whole people of Israel,⁷⁰ who are now given a means of atonement for their sin. As for Aaron, who had first “brought sin upon Israel,”⁷¹ in carrying out this office, his position before God is so reversed that “the glory of the Lord appeared” to him and through his blessing, “to all the people.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Kohlenberger, *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament*, 289; “He will fill [the] hand of you.” מִלֵּא אֶתְּךָ

מִלֵּא:

⁷⁰ Ex 34:6-7.

⁷¹ Ex 32:15-24.

⁷² Lev 9:4,22-23.

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