

The Levitical System

In the Old Testament the nation of Israel interacted with God through the levitical priesthood. This system lasted until the death of Christ, with both fulfilled and ended that system. (I realize that the Jews continued to offer sacrifices until the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, but this was done in disobedience and unbelief; Christ's death put an end to the old system and instituted a new one.)

Since the levitical system does not apply to our lives today, why should it be studied? I think there are several key reasons:

- The levitical system was given to help the Israelites understand salvation. Hebrews 10:1 calls it an “image”. It is a beautiful picture of mankind's greatest problem and God's amazing solution. Understanding the levitical system helps us understand our own sinfulness and God's unimaginable holiness.
- When the Old Testament was written, Israel lived under the levitical system. There are some events in the Bible that are difficult to understand unless we know the context in which they took place.
- The New Testament refers extensively to the levitical system to help explain salvation. These references are lost on us if we don't understand what it is referring to.

It is impossible to cover the levitical system in any great detail in a single lesson, so I am just going to go over the highlights. This won't tell you everything that there is to know, but it will get you started.

Blood Atonement

The Bible tells us that the forgiveness of sins requires the shedding of blood:

Hebrews 9:22: “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.”

You see, God cannot overlook sin and sweep it under the rug. In order for sin to be forgiven *it has to be paid for*. God is just, and justice demands payment. Since the wages of sin is death, that means that in order for us to be forgiven, something has to die.

In the Mosaic Law God commanded that animals be sacrificed as payment for sins. The blood of animals would be used to make atonement. The reason that animals were used is because sins could only be paid for with the blood of an innocent party:

Leviticus 17:11: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh

an atonement for the soul.”

However, sacrificing animals was not the final answer, nor was it ever intended to be. The sacrificial system looked forward to the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God. The blood of animals was not able to pay for the sins of man:

Hebrews 10:4: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.”

The only way our sins could be paid for was through the blood of a man – an innocent man who had never sinned. That is why Jesus came, lived a sinless life, and died. He had to be sinless, because if He had sinned then He would be dying for His own sins, not for ours. The only way He could die in our place was if He had no sins of His own to die for. Since Jesus was sinless, He could make atonement for us with His own blood:

Hebrews 9:12: “Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.”

The Levitical system pointed to Christ. The sacrifice of lambs looked forward to the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The system was not an end of itself; it was a shadow of things to come.

Incidentally, this is also why Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved. He is the only offering that can pay for our sins, and our sins *must* be paid for in order for us to be accepted by God. It is therefore impossible to be saved apart from Jesus.

The Levites

In the Old Testament the Lord took the tribe of Levi and dedicated them to the priesthood and the service of the tabernacle. The rest of the Israelites were not allowed to serve in the tabernacle on pain of death:

Numbers 18:22: “Neither must the children of Israel henceforth come nigh the tabernacle of the congregation, lest they bear sin, and die.

23 But the Levites shall do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they have no inheritance.”

The nation of Israel could not interact directly with God; instead they went through the Levites. The Levites acted as an intermediary between God and Israel. The reason this was needed was because God was holy and Israel was not. The Israelites were simply too unclean to approach God. The only way they could interact with God was if someone who was trained and set apart did it on their behalf. That was the role that the Levites played – they were set apart and trained for the service of God.

Approaching God was not something to be taken lightly. God was so holy that sinful man could not survive in His presence. Notice the strict instructions that God gave to the Israelites when they approached Mount Sinai:

Exodus 19:10: "And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes,

11 And be ready against the third day: for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai.

12 And thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, to touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall surely be put to death:

13 There shall not a hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through: whether it be beast or man, it shall not live: when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount.

...

And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.

20 And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up.

21 And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish.

22 And let the priests also, which come near to the Lord, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them."

The Lord was so holy that if the people had merely gazed upon the Lord they would have died! Even just *touching* the mountain on which the Lord had come down was punishable by death. The Levites acted as a protective barrier. They knew how to cleanse themselves, how to properly offer sacrifices, and how to behave. Most importantly, though, they were directly appointed by God to be the only people who were allowed to approach Him. The priests offered sacrifices on behalf of the people, and once a year the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the people.

As was said earlier, the entire tribe of Levi was set aside to serve God. They were responsible for maintaining the tabernacle (and later the Temple) and offering sacrifices:

Numbers 3:6: "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him.

7 And they shall keep his charge, and the charge of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of the congregation, to do the service of the tabernacle.

8 And they shall keep all the instruments of the tabernacle of the congregation, and the charge of the children of Israel, to do the service of the tabernacle.

9 And thou shalt give the Levites unto Aaron and to his sons: they are wholly given unto him out of the children of Israel.

10 And thou shalt appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall wait on the priest's office: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death."

Since God set them apart to serve Him, they were not given any inheritance in the land of Canaan. Each tribe was given their own plot of land, but the Levites were not. This is because of their unique role. Since they had no land of their own (although God did set aside some cities for them), they were to be supported by the tithe:

Numbers 18:20: “And the Lord spake unto Aaron, Thou shalt have no inheritance in their land, neither shalt thou have any part among them: I am thy part and thine inheritance among the children of Israel.

21 And, behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tenth in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they serve, even the service of the tabernacle of the congregation.

22 Neither must the children of Israel henceforth come nigh the tabernacle of the congregation, lest they bear sin, and die.

23 But the Levites shall do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they shall bear their iniquity: it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they have no inheritance.

24 But the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer as a heave offering unto the Lord, I have given to the Levites to inherit: therefore I have said unto them, Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.”

As verse 24 explains, the Levites were given a tithe instead of a portion of land. The Israelites gave the Levites a tenth of their produce and livestock, which the Levites needed in order to support themselves. The Levites, in turn, gave a tenth of this tithe to the priests:

Numbers 19:26: “Thus speak unto the Levites, and say unto them, When ye take of the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them for your inheritance, then ye shall offer up a heave offering of it for the Lord, even a tenth part of the tithe.

27 And this your heave offering shall be reckoned unto you, as though it were the corn of the threshingfloor, and as the fullness of the winepress.

28 Thus ye also shall offer an heave offering unto the Lord of all your tithes, which ye receive of the children of Israel; and ye shall give thereof the Lord's heave offering to Aaron the priest.”

The priests did not give a tithe to anyone.

It should be noted that the tithe consisted of livestock and produce; it was not a monetary amount. Although there was a temple tax that was a monetary amount, that tax was separate from the tithe. God required that all Israelites pay the tithe, and when it was not paid the Lord became quite angry:

Malachi 3:8: “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.

9 Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.

10 Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”

Whenever Israel failed to pay the tithe they made it impossible for the Levites to continue to work in the tabernacle. This created a serious problem because the only people who could offer

sacrifices were the priests. If the priests could not do their jobs then that meant no one could approach God. It also meant that there was no one offering sacrifices for forgiveness or atoning for the sins of the people. If the priests were gone then Israel's access to God was also gone. Tithing was a very serious matter.

Although the entire tribe of Levi served God in some capacity, not everyone was charged with the same task. The role that you played depended on your lineage. Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. These men created three different lines, and each line had their own duties. The book of Numbers outlines these duties in great detail. The sons of **Gershon** were charged with maintaining the curtains of the tabernacle:

Numbers 3:24: "And the charge of the sons of Gershon in the tabernacle of the congregation shall be the tabernacle, and the tent, the covering thereof, and the hanging the door of the tabernacle of the congregation,
26 And the hangings of the court, and the curtain for the door of the court, which is by the tabernacle, and by the alter round about, and the cords of it for all the service thereof."

The sons of **Kohath** were charged with taking care of the items within the tabernacle itself:

Numbers 3:31: "And their charge shall be the ark, and the table, and the candlestick, and the altars, and the vessels of the sanctuary wherewith they minister, and the hanging, and all the service thereof."

As you can see, this included the Ark of the Covenant, the altars, and the various sacrificial vessels.

The sons of **Merari** were charged with the physical structure of the tabernacle:

Numbers 3:36: "And under the custody and charge of the sons of Merari shall be the boards of the tabernacle, and the bars thereof, and the pillars thereof, and the sockets thereof, and all the vessels thereof, and all that serveth thereto,
37 And the pillars of the court round about, and their sockets, and their pins, and their cords."

Notice that *none* of these groups were charged with performing sacrifices. While the entire tribe of Levi was dedicated to serving in the tabernacle, the only people who could offer sacrifices were the priests. In order to be a priest you had to be a descendent of Aaron:

Numbers 3:10: "And thou shalt appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall wait on their priest's office: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death."

No one else was allowed to offer sacrifices. As you can see, all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.

Besides being a descendent of Aaron, the priests also had to be physically perfect. If they had any physical defect they were not allowed to be a priest:

Leviticus 21:17: “Speak unto Aaron, saying, Whosoever he be of thy seed in their generations that hath any blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God.

18 For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous,

19 Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded,

20 Or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken;

21 No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the Lord made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God.”

They also had to be between 25 and 50 years old:

Numbers 8:23: “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,

24 This is it that belongeth unto the Levites: from twenty and five years old and upward they shall go in to wait upon the service of the tabernacle of the congregation:

25 And from the age of fifty years they shall cease waiting upon the service thereof, and shall serve no more:

26 But shall minister with their brethren in the tabernacle of the congregation, to keep the charge, and shall do no service. Thus shalt thou do unto the Levites touching their charge.”

God also put restrictions on who they could marry. Priests were not allowed to marry anyone who was a widow or divorced, and they were required to marry a fellow Levite:

Leviticus 21:13: “And he shall take a wife in her virginity.

14 A widow, or a divorced woman, or profane, or an harlot, these shall he not take: but he shall take a virgin of his own people to wife.”

Being a priest was a very honorable and important thing – but it was also very dangerous. You had to do everything right all of the time. If you stepped out of line while performing your duties then the Lord would strike you dead:

Leviticus 10:1: “And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not.

2 And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.

3 Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is it that the Lord spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.”

You were not allowed to improvise, change things, or do things your way. You had to do things God's way all of the time *or you died*.

Some people look at this and come to the conclusion that God was very harsh back then, but now He's changed and is more lenient. That is not the case. You see, God never changes. The God who was so specific and demanding in the Old Testament is the very same God who rules today. God demanded complete and utter holiness in the Old Testament and God still demands that in the New Testament. He demanded complete perfection before and He still demands it now. The difference is that in the Old Testament the nation of Israel tried to live up to that standard, and they failed miserably. The truth is that no one can live up to that standard. It is impossible – and that is the whole point. The New Testament tells us that the reason God gave the Law was to show mankind that we cannot keep it. The Law was a schoolmaster to point us to Christ, the One who kept the law on our behalf.

The Law proves that we cannot come to God in our own righteousness; we are just not good enough. Thanks to Christ, however, we don't have to try to do the impossible. Instead, we now approach God with the imputed righteousness of Christ. When we are saved God credits Christ's righteousness to our account. Jesus lived and died a perfect life, and when God looks at us that is what He sees. Instead of seeing us for who we are, God sees us dressed in Christ's perfect righteousness and holiness. That makes all the difference. God still requires complete and utter perfection and holiness – but Christ accomplished that for us.

Unfortunately, there are many people who are not interested in obtaining righteousness from God. Instead they want to approach God on their own terms and try to measure up by living what they consider to be good lives. However, that approach is not going to work. God made it absolutely clear that He can only be approached His way, on His terms. The levitical system in the Old Testament tells us that our own attempts at holiness fall far short of what God requires. Christ's righteousness is the only way we will ever be able to stand before God. Nothing else will do.

When Christ came He put an end to the system of Levites. We no longer need Levites and priests to stand between us and God. Instead we have a different mediator – Christ Himself:

1 Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

We can now boldly approach the throne of grace because Christ has paid the way for us. We no longer need to go to Levites in order to seek forgiveness; instead we go to Christ.

Today we no longer have Levites; instead we have pastors. Pastors are shepherds and evangelists who teach us the Word and preach the gospel. We don't go to them for forgiveness and they don't offer sacrifices on our behalf. They don't need to, because Christ has finished that work. Their job is to point us to Christ.

The Temple

When the Israelites were camped at Mount Sinai the Lord gave Moses more than just the Ten Commandments. Over a period of 40 days the Lord gave Moses hundreds of commandments. He also gave Moses the plans for the tabernacle. The tabernacle was not just a building; it was far more than that. In today's world we have churches where the people of God meet to serve and worship Him. However, God doesn't actually live in the church. The church is just a building where God's people meet.

However, God actually *did* live in the tabernacle. It was literally God's house:

Exodus 25:8: “And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them.

9 According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it.”

Today God dwells within us, but back then the gift of the Holy Spirit had not yet been given. (The Holy Spirit did exist but He was only with people on rare occasions. He was not with all believers all of the time, the way He is now.) In the Old Testament God actually had a street address. If you wanted to approach God you went to the Temple, because that's the place God had chosen. The sacrifices were made at the Temple. Offerings were given at the Temple. If the king wanted to ask God a question he had to go to the Temple. That was literally where God lived – He manifested His glory there.

The tabernacle was paid for by freewill offerings from the people. God told the people what items were needed for the tabernacle's construction, and people willingly gave everything that was required.

The instructions that God gave for building the tabernacle were incredibly exact. The Lord specified every detail, right down to the curtains:

Exodus 26:1: “Moreover thou shalt make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen, and blue, and purple, and scarlet: with cherubims of cunning work shalt thou make them.

2 The length of one curtain shall be eight and twenty cubits, and the breadth of one curtain four cubits: and every one of the curtains shall have one measure. . .”

These directions go on for quite some time. In the following sections we will take a look at some of the key portions of the tabernacle.

One thing to keep in mind, though, is that Christ's death changed everything. Temples and churches are two very different things. God no longer dwells in a building; instead His Spirit dwells inside us. The Temple existed so that men might go to God for things such as forgiveness (offering sacrifices) and wisdom (inquiring of God). God did not live *within* His people; instead He lived *among* them. Today, though, we can access God directly. The Bible commands us to go directly to Him for forgiveness and to pray directly to Him for wisdom. We no longer need a Temple, for our bodies *are* temples (1 Corinthians 3:16).

The Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant was kept in the heart of the tabernacle, in the room known as the Holy of Holies. The only person who was allowed to enter that room was the High Priest, and he could only enter it once a year on the Day of Atonement. At that time he would make atonement for the people by entering the Holy of Holies and sprinkling blood on the mercy seat. The Ark was where God physically manifested His glory. When the High Priest entered the room he could actually see the glory of God (something theologians refer to as the Shekinah Glory).

God gave very precise instructions for building the **Ark of the Covenant**. It was 3.75 feet long

and 2.25 feet high. The ark was made of wood and covered in pure gold:

Exodus 25:10: “And they shall make an ark of shittim wood: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof.

11 And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it, and shalt make upon it a crown of gold round about.”

The Ark had some wooden poles that were permanently attached to it:

Exodus 25:12: “And thou shalt cast four rings of gold for it, and put them in the four corners thereof; and two rings shall be in the one side of it, and two rings in the other side of it.

13 And thou shalt make staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold.

14 And thou shalt put the staves into the rings by the sides of the ark, that the ark may be borne with them.

15 The staves shall be in the rings of the ark: they shall not be taken from it.”

The Ark was to be transported by these wooden staves. Priests would carry the ark by lifting the wooden poles onto their shoulders. The Ark could never be touched; anyone who dared to touch it was instantly killed. There was one time when Israel tried to transport the Ark by a cart instead of by the staves. When Uzza reached out to steady the Ark, God instantly killed him:

I Chronicles 13:9: “And when they came unto the threshingfloor of Chidon, Uzza put forth his hand to hold the ark; for the oxen stumbled.

10 And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzza, and he smote him, because he put his hand to the ark: and there he died before God.”

The mercy seat was the top portion of the Ark. If you have ever seen a picture of the Ark, it is the part that has the angels on it. This is how God described it:

Exodus 25:17: “And thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof.

18 And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat.

19 And make one cherub on the one end, and the other cherub on the other end: even of the mercy seat shall ye make the cherubims on the two ends thereof.

20 And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be.

21 And thou shalt put the mercy seat above upon the ark; and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee.”

As was said earlier, God physically manifested His glory at the mercy seat:

Exodus 25:22: “And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from

above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.”

Leviticus 16:2: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the vail before the mercy seat, which is upon the ark; that he die not: for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat.”

When the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement, he was actually coming directly into contact with the glory of God. (Imagine being able to enter the Temple and physically see the glory of God!)

God commanded that the Ten Commandments be placed inside the Ark:

Exodus 25:21: “. . . in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee.”

Later, God commanded that Aaron's rod be placed in the Ark (Numbers 17:10), along with a jar of manna (Exodus 16:32-33). Ultimately, though, those two items were lost, and all that remained were the tablets (2 Chronicles 5:10).

There has been a lot of speculation about where the Ark of the Covenant is currently located. Interestingly, while the Ark was in Solomon's Temple, it was not in the temple that existed during Christ's day. There are a lot of theories about where the Ark might be, but I don't think you'll find it on Earth. The book of Revelation tells us that it is in Heaven:

Revelation 11:19: “And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.”

Today we have no need for the Ark because Jesus – our High Priest – has already made atonement for us. As Hebrews 9:12 said, Jesus entered once into the holy place and made atonement for us with His own blood. He will never have to do that again; that work is done. As Jesus said on the cross, it is finished.

The Holy Place

As was said before, the Ark of the Covenant was in the heart of the tabernacle in a place called the Holy of Holies. The only person who was allowed to enter this small room was the High Priest, and he could only enter it once a year on the Day of Atonement. The reason he entered this room was to make atonement for the sins of Israel.

The Holy of Holies was about 15 feet wide and 15 feet long. It was separated from the holy place by a veil. It contained no artificial light, for none was needed; it was literally lit by the glory of God.

Beyond the Holy of Holies, separated by a veil, was the Holy Place. This room was 45 feet long and 15 feet wide. The priests were allowed to enter this room, but the Levites and the common people were not. Everything in this room was golden. This is where the golden lampstand, the golden shewbread table, and the golden altar of incense was located. Although the priests worked in this area, there were no chairs; the priests were not allowed to sit down. This is because their work was never completed. When Christ atoned for our sins, however, He sat down at the right hand of God – indicating that His work was finished (Hebrew 10:11-12).

The **golden lampstand** is what lit the Holy Place where the priests worked. It was hammered from one massive piece of gold and weighed about 75 pounds. (Today this lampstand is known as the menorah, and is a famous Jewish symbol.) These are the specifications that God gave for it:

Exodus 25:31: “And thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold: of beaten work shall the candlestick be made: his shaft, and his branches, his bowls, his knops, and his flowers, shall be of the same.

32 And six branches shall come out of the sides of it; three branches of the candlestick out of the one side, and three branches of the candlestick out of the other side:

33 Three bowls made like unto almonds, with a knop and a flower in one branch; and three bowls made like almonds in the other branch, with a knop and a flower: so in the six branches that come out of the candlestick.

34 And in the candlesticks shall be four bowls made like unto almonds, with their knops and their flowers.

35 And there shall be a knop under two branches of the same, and a knop under two branches of the same, and a knop under two branches of the same, according to the six branches that proceed out of the candlestick.

36 Their knops and their branches shall be of the same: all it shall be one beaten work of pure gold.

37 And thou shalt make the seven lamps thereof: and they shall light the lamps thereof, that they may give light over against it.

38 And the tongs thereof, and the snuffdishes thereof, shall be of pure gold.

39 Of a talent of pure gold shall he make it, with all these vessels.

40 And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount.”

The lampstand had seven lamps, which burned pure olive oil:

Exodus 27:20: “And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamp to burn always.”

The lampstand was to be continually lit.

The **shewbread table** was inside the Holy Place and was made of wood overlain in gold. It was 3 feet long, 1.5 feet wide, and 2.25 feet high. It had four legs and was carried by two golden poles that were inserted into gold rings. These are the specifications for it:

Exodus 25:23: “Thou shalt also make a table of shittim wood: two cubits shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof.

24 And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, and make thereto a crown of gold round about.

25 And thou shalt make unto it a border of an hand breadth round about, and thou shalt make a golden crown to the border thereof round about.

26 And thou shalt make for it four rings of gold, and put the rings in the four corners that are on the four feet thereof.

27 Over against the border shall the rings be for places of the staves to bear the table.

28 And thou shalt make the staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold, that the table may be borne with them.

29 And thou shalt make the dishes thereof, and spoons thereof, and covers thereof, and bowls thereof, to cover withal: of pure gold shalt thou make them.

30 And thou shalt set upon the table shewbread before me alway.”

As you can see, the table had a number of utensils on it: there were dishes, spoons (for sprinkling incense), pitchers (for liquid offerings), and bowls (which contained the incense). The purpose of this table was to hold the 12 loaves of shewbread. Each loaf symbolized one of the tribes of Israel. The loaves were made from fine flour:

Leviticus 24:5: “And thou shalt take fine flour, and bake twelve cakes thereof: two tenth deals shall be in one cake.

6 And thou shalt set them in two rows, six on a row, upon the pure table before the Lord.”

The loaves were not there for decoration. Every Sabbath day new loaves were provided, and the priests were commanded to eat these holy loaves:

Leviticus 24:8: “Every sabbath he shall set it in order before the Lord continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant.

9 And it shall be Aaron's and his sons'; and they shall eat it in the holy place: for it is most holy unto him of the offerings of the Lord made by fire by a perpetual statute.”

The loaves were not simply food; they were a holy offering – and like some of the other

offerings, they were to be eaten by the priests.

The **golden altar** was also kept in the Holy Place. It was made of wood overlain in gold, and it was three feet tall and 1.5 feet square. The priests used it to offer incense:

Exodus 30:1: “And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it.

2 A cubit shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; foursquare shall it be: and two cubits shall be the height thereof: the horns thereof shall be of the same.

3 And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, the top thereof, and the sides thereof round about, and the horns thereof; and thou shalt make unto it a crown of gold round about.”

Like the Ark and the table of shewbread, the altar was carried by poles that were inserted through gold rings:

Exodus 30:4: “And two golden rings shalt thou make to it under the crown of it, by the two corners thereof, upon the two sides of it shalt thou make it; and they shall be for places for the staves to bear it withal.

5 And thou shalt make the staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold.”

The priests offered incense upon it every morning and every evening:

Exodus 30:7: “And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it.

8 And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations.

9 Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon.”

The commandment in verse 9 is very important. Two of Aaron's sons once offered strange incense, and the Lord killed them for it. The priests were not allowed to just offer anything that they wanted. No burnt offerings, meat offerings, or drink offerings could be offered on the altar of incense; only incense was allowed. On top of that, the priests were not allowed to offer just any kind of incense. Only a special type could be used:

Exodus 30:34: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight:

35 And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy:

36 And thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be unto you most holy.

37 And as for the perfume which thou shalt make, ye shall not make to yourselves

according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for the Lord.

38 Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.”

As you can see, no one else was allowed to make this type of incense and use it for their own purposes. It was strictly reserved for the tabernacle.

The Outer Court

Outside of the tabernacle, surrounding it, was the outer court. This is where the bronze altar was located. The courtyard was 150 feet by 75 feet; it was situated east to west, with the entrance facing east. The common people (but not Gentiles) were allowed to enter this area.

The **bronze altar** was located in this court and is where sacrifices were offered. It was 7.5 feet square and 4.25 feet high. The altar was made of wood and overlain with brass:

Exodus 27:1: “And thou shalt make an altar of shittim wood, five cubits long, and five cubits broad; the altar shall be foursquare: and the height thereof shall be three cubits.

2 And thou shalt make the horns of it upon the four corners thereof: his horns shall be of the same: and thou shalt overlay it with brass.

3 And thou shalt make his pans to receive his ashes, and his shovels, and his basons, and his fleshhooks, and his firepans: all the vessels thereof thou shalt make of brass.

4 And thou shalt make for it a grate of network of brass; and upon the net shalt thou make four brasen rings in the four corners thereof.

5 And thou shalt put it under the compass of the altar beneath, that the net may be even to the midst of the altar.”

When an animal was sacrificed on this altar, the priests would catch the blood in a basin and pour it out at the foot of the altar. This would make atonement for the sin, and the sinner would go home forgiven – but as soon as they sinned again they would have to come and make another sacrifice. Since the people constantly sinned, that meant that sacrifices had to be continually offered.

Once a year (on the Day of Atonement) a sacrifice was made for the sins of the High Priest. After his sins were atoned for he would go into the Holy of Holies and make atonement for the sins of the people.

One of the magnificent things about the sacrifice of Christ is that His one sacrifice completed the atonement for all of our sins. No other sacrifice will ever be needed. Israel had to continually offer sacrifices for their sins, but Christ offered Himself once and finished the task (Hebrews 7:27).

As a side-note, verse 2 speaks of the horns of the altar. In the Bible horns are symbolic of power. When animals were sacrificed on the altar they were tied to those horns. The horns did serve another purpose, however. If someone was falsely accused of murder they could take refuge by fleeing to the tabernacle and grabbing the horns of the altar:

1 Kings 1:50: “And Adonijah feared because of Solomon, and arose, and went, and

caught hold on the horns of the altar.”

If he was innocent then God commanded that he be spared, but if he was guilty then he was to be taken away and killed.

The Urim and the Thummim

In the Old Testament the Lord gave His people a unique way to communicate with Him. The High Priest was given something that was called the Urim and the Thummim:

Exodus 28:30: “And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before the Lord: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord continually.”

The Urim and the Thummim apparently went into the High Priest's breastplate. No one knows exactly what they were or how they worked. All we know is that they were used to inquire of God:

1 Samuel 27:6: “And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.”

Ezra 2:63: “And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim.”

As you might imagine, this ability to ask God questions and get back direct answers was very useful, and throughout the Bible various kings used it. However, this form of communication with God only appears in the Old Testament. Today the Urim and the Thummim are gone, and God has replaced it with something else: the Bible. The Scriptures contain everything that we need:

2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:
17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

We no longer need to go through a priest in order to discover God's will. The apostle Paul tells us that the Bible contains enough information to furnish us unto *all* good works. In other words, it contains *everything* that we need to know in order to serve God during this part of history. We do not need any additional divine revelation; the Bible is enough.

There is a great deal more that can be said about the levitical system, but since time is short I will bring this paper to a close. If you would like to learn more about the levitical system then take a look at the book of Hebrews. That book offers an amazing look at how the sacrificial system pointed to Christ, who both fulfilled and ended it.