

The Levitical System

In the Old Testament the nation of Israel interacted with God through the Levitical priesthood. That system lasted until the death of Christ, with both fulfilled and ended that system. (I realize 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 covenant and instituted a new one.)

Since the Levitical system doesn't apply to our lives today, why should it be studied? I think there are several key reasons:

- One of the purposes of the sacrificial system was to help the Israelites understand salvation. Hebrews 10:1 calls it an “image”. It's a beautiful picture of mankind's greatest problem (sin) and God's amazing solution (the gospel). Understanding the sacrificial system helps us understand our own sinfulness and God's unimaginable holiness.
- When the Old Testament was written, Israel lived under the sacrificial 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 this system to help explain salvation. These references are lost on us if we don't understand what they're referring to.

It's impossible to cover the Levitical system in any great detail in a single lesson, so I'm just going to review the highlights. This won't tell you everything that there is to learn, but I'm hoping it will help 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.”

God can't 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 His justice demands payment. Since the wages of sin is death, in order for us to be forgiven someone has to die.

In the Mosaic Law the Lord commanded that animals be sacrificed as payment for sins. The blood of animals was used to make atonement for sin. The reason animals were used is because sins can only be paid for by the blood of an innocent and sinless 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 wasn't the answer, nor was it ever intended to be. The sacrificial system actually looked forward to the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God. The blood of animals wasn't able to pay for the sins of mankind:

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 an innocent man who never sinned. That's why Jesus

became a man (while remaining fully God), came into this world, lived a sinless life, and died on the cross. 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 take our place and 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 pointed to the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. This means the sacrificial system wasn't an end of itself. It was a shadow of things to come.

This is 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 forgiven! It's 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 weren't allowed to serve in the tabernacle on pain of death:

Numbers 18:22-23: “Neither must the children of Israel henceforth come nigh the tabernacle of the congregation, lest they bear sin, and die. 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 Israelites couldn't interact directly with God. Instead they went through the Levites, who acted as an intermediary between God and Israel. The reason this was needed is because God was holy and Israel was not. The Israelites were too sinful to approach God. The only way they could interact with Him was if someone who was trained and set apart did so on their behalf. That's the role the tribe of Levi played. They were set apart for the service of God.

Approaching God was a serious matter. God is so holy that sinful human beings can't survive in His presence! Notice the strict instructions that God gave the Israelites when they approached Him at Mount Sinai:

Exodus 19:10-13: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes, 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. 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: 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.”

Exodus 19:19-22: “And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice. 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. 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. 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 Him 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.

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

Numbers 3:6-10: “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him. 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. 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. And thou shalt give the Levites unto Aaron and to his sons: they are wholly given unto him out of the children of Israel. 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 weren't given any inheritance in the land of Canaan. Each tribe was given their own plot of land – except for the Levites. 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 supported by the tithes:

Numbers 18:20-24: “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. 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. Neither must the children of Israel henceforth come nigh the tabernacle of the congregation, lest they bear sin, and die. 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. 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.”

The Levites were given a tithe instead of a portion of land. The Israelites were required to give the Levites a tenth of their produce and livestock, which the Levites needed to support themselves. The Levites then gave a tenth of this tithe to the priests:

Numbers 19:26-28: “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. 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. 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 didn't give a tithe to anyone.

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

Malachi 3:8-10: “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. 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 couldn't do their jobs then that meant *no one could approach God*. It also meant 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. That's why tithing was such a serious matter.

Although the entire tribe of Levi served God, not everyone was given the same task. The role that people played depended on their lineage. Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. These men created three different family lines, and each one had their own duties.

The book of Numbers explains these duties in great detail. The sons of **Gershon** were responsible for maintaining the curtains of the tabernacle:

Numbers 3:25-26: “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, 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 given the task of 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.”

This included the Ark of the Covenant, the altars, and the various sacrificial vessels.

The sons of **Merari** maintained the physical structure of the tabernacle:

Numbers 3:36-37: “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, And the pillars of the court round about, and their sockets, and their pins, and their cords.”

Notice that *none* of these groups were responsible for 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 direct descendant 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. This means that all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.

Besides being a descendant of Aaron, the priests also had to be physically perfect. If they had any physical defect they weren't allowed to be a priest:

Leviticus 21:17-21: “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. 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, Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded, Or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken; 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 8:23-26: “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, 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: And from the age of fifty years they shall cease waiting upon the service thereof, and shall serve no more: 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 weren't allowed to marry anyone who was a widow or divorced. They were also required to marry a fellow Levite:

Leviticus 21:13-14: “And he shall take a wife in her virginity. 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 dangerous. Priests had to do everything right all of

the time. If they stepped out of line while performing their duties then the Lord might strike them dead on the spot. That's exactly what happened to two of Aaron's children:

Leviticus 10:1-3: “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. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. 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.”

Priests weren't allowed to improvise, change things, or do things their way. They had to do things God's way all of the time.

Some people look at this and come to the conclusion that God was very harsh in those days, but today He's changed and is more lenient. That's not the case! The Bible tells us that *God never changes* (Malachi 3:6). The God who was so specific and demanding in the Old Testament is the very same God who rules today! God required complete and utter holiness in the Old Testament and He *still* requires that in the New Testament. The difference is that in the Old Testament the Jews tried to live up to that standard and failed. The reason they failed is because *no one can live up to that standard*. It's impossible – and that's the whole point! The reason God gave the Mosaic Law to Israel was to show mankind that we're incapable of keeping it. The law was a schoolmaster to point us to Christ (Galatians 3:24), the Savior who kept the entire law on our behalf.

The law proves that we can't come to God in our own righteousness. We're just not good enough – but because of Christ we don't have to try to do the impossible! Instead we approach God with the imputed righteousness of Christ (Romans 4:20-25).

This means when we're saved God credits Christ's righteousness to our account. Jesus lived and died a perfect life, and when God looks at Christians He sees the perfect righteousness of Christ. That makes all the difference! God still requires us to be utterly perfect and completely holy – and since Christ accomplished that for us, that's what God sees when He looks at those who are saved.

Unfortunately, there are many people who aren't interested in obtaining righteousness from God. Instead they want to approach God on their own terms by living what they consider to be good lives. However, that approach isn't going to work. God made it absolutely clear that He can only be approached His way, on His terms. The Levitical system teaches us that our own attempts at holiness fall far short of what God requires. Christ's righteousness is the only way we can be saved! Nothing else will do.

The Lord Jesus Christ put an end to the Levitical system. We no longer need Levites and priests to stand between us and God. Instead we have a different mediator – Jesus Himself:

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

The reason we can boldly approach the throne of grace is because Christ paid the way for us. We no longer need to go to Levites to seek forgiveness! Instead we must go directly to Christ.

Today we no longer have Levites. Instead we have preachers, elders, and evangelists, who teach us the Word and preach the gospel. We don't go to any of 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 Tabernacle

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, which was a very special place. In today's world we have church buildings where the people of God meet to serve and worship Him. However, God doesn't actually live in those buildings. They're just locations where God's people meet.

In the Old Testament the Lord actually *did* manifest His presence in the tabernacle. It was literally God's house:

Exodus 25:8-9: “And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. 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 in the Old Testament the gift of the Holy Spirit had not yet been given. Christ gave Christians the gift of the Holy Spirit when He ascended back into Heaven – but before that the Holy Spirit was a rare gift that was only given to a few people.

This means in the Old Testament the Lord actually had a street address! If you wanted to approach God then you went to the tabernacle because that's the place God chose to manifest Himself. The sacrifices were made at the tabernacle. People's offerings were given at the tabernacle. If a ruler wanted to ask God a question he had to go to the tabernacle. That's where God manifested His glory.

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

The instructions God gave for building the tabernacle

were very specific. The plans were very detailed, right down to the curtains:

Exodus 26:1-2: “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. 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! (Later in this document we'll take a look at some of the key items of the tabernacle.)

One thing to keep in mind is that Christ's death changed everything. Tabernacles and churches are two very different things! God no longer dwells in a building; instead His Spirit dwells inside us. The tabernacle existed so that people might go before God for things such as forgiveness (offering sacrifices) and wisdom (inquiring of God). In those days God didn't live *within* His people; instead He lived *among* them. Today we can access God without going through Levites or priests. 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 because our bodies *are* temples (1 Corinthians 3:16).

The Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant was located 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. On that day he would make atonement for the people by entering the Holy of Holies and sprinkling sacrificial 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.

The Lord 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 25:10-11: “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. 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 wooden poles which were permanently attached to it:

Exodus 25:12-15: “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. And thou shalt make staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold. And thou shalt put the staves into the rings by the sides of the ark, that the ark may be borne with them. The staves shall be in the rings of the ark: they shall not be taken from it.”

The Ark was supposed to be transported by those 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 13:9-10: “And when they came unto the threshingfloor of Chidon, Uzza put forth his hand to hold the ark; for the oxen stumbled. 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 upper portion of the Ark. If you've ever seen a picture of the Ark, it's the part that has the angels on it. This is how God described it:

Exodus 25:17-21: “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. And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat. 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. 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. 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.”

God visibly 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 tabernacle and 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 as well (Numbers 17:10), along with a jar of manna (Exodus 16:32-33). Ultimately those two items were lost, and all that remained were the tablets (2 Chronicles 5:10).

There's 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 wasn't in the temple which existed during Christ's day. There are a lot of theories about where the Ark might be hidden but I don't think you'll find it on Earth. The book of Revelation tells us that it's 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! This is 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! The work of our redemption is done. As Jesus said on the cross, it is finished (John 19:30).

The Holy Place

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

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, because none was needed. It was literally lit by the glory of God!

Outside 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 that room was golden. This was 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 weren't allowed to sit down because their work was never completed. However, when Christ atoned for our sins He sat down at the right hand of God – indicating that His work of redemption was finished:

Hebrews 10:10-14: “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of

Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest **standeth** daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, **sat down** on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”

The Golden Lampstand

The golden lampstand lit the Holy Place where the priests worked. It was crafted 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 God gave for it:

Exodus 25:31-40: “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. 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: 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. And in the candlesticks shall be four bowls made like unto almonds, with their knops and their flowers. 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. Their knops and their branches shall be of the same: all it shall be one beaten work of pure gold. And thou shalt make the seven lamps thereof: and they shall light the lamps thereof, that they may give light over against it. And the tongs thereof, and the snuffdishes thereof, shall be of pure gold. Of a talent of pure gold shall he make it, with all these vessels. 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

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 25:23-30: “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. And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, and make thereto a crown of gold round about. 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. 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. Over against the border shall the rings be for places of the staves to bear the table. And thou shalt make the staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold, that the table may be borne with them. 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. And thou shalt set upon the table shewbread before me alway.”

The table had a number of utensils on it. There were dishes, spoons for sprinkling incense, pitchers for liquid offerings, and bowls which contained 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 24:5-6: “And thou shalt take fine flour, and bake twelve cakes thereof: two tenth deals shall be in one cake. And thou shalt set them in two rows, six on a row, upon the pure table before the Lord.”

The loaves weren't there for decoration. Every Sabbath day new loaves were provided, and the priests were commanded to eat these holy loaves in the presence of God:

Leviticus 24:8-9: “Every sabbath he shall set it

in order before the Lord continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant. 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 weren't 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

The golden altar was 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 30:1-3: “And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it. 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. 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 30:4-5: “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. 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 30:7-9: “And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning; when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations. 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 immediately killed them for it. The priests weren't allowed to offer anything 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 weren't allowed to offer just any kind of incense. Only a special type could be used:

Exodus 30:34-38: “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: And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy: 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. 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. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.”

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 building itself 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 27:1-5: “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. 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. 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. 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. 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 sin. 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 7:22-27: “By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament. And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.”

Exodus 27:2 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 put to death.

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 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 people somehow used them 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.”

This ability to ask God questions and get back direct answers was very useful! 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 because God has replaced it with something else: the Bible. The Scriptures contain everything we need:

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

We no longer need to go through a priest to discover God's will. The apostle Paul tells us that the Bible contains enough information to furnish us unto *all* good works! That means the Bible contains *everything* we need to serve God during this part of history. We don't need any additional divine revelation! The Bible is enough.

There's a great deal more that can be said about the Levitical system. If you'd like to learn more about it then study the book of Hebrews. That book offers an amazing look at how the sacrificial system pointed to Christ, who both fulfilled and ended it.