



Who was “the Levite” in Deut. 18:6?

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From the dawn of biblical criticism, the opening verses of Deuteronomy 18 have played a crucial role in efforts to understand the history and development of the Israelite priesthood. It seems clear that the priestly activity described in these verses (and elsewhere in Deuteronomy) varies from the accounts in the Priestly sources of the Torah in Exodus through Numbers. One obvious difference is the lack of differentiation among the Levitical clans, in contrast to the primacy given to Aaron’s descendants elsewhere.

Other distinctive aspects of Deuteronomy’s priests are summarized in JTS rabbinic alumnus Jeffrey Tigay’s superb commentary.¹ Despite the critical issues, the gist of Deut. 18:1-8 is clear: the verses describe what Tigay calls “the endowments of the clergy,” meaning how they are supported considering their lack of entitlement to a landhold.² The details, however, are replete with problems of interpretation.

Verses 6-8 are particularly salient, and may open a window into the behavior of Deuteronomy’s clergy in early Israel:

(ו) וְכִי יָבֹא הַלֵּוִי מֵאֶחָד שְׁעָרֶיךָ מִכָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הוּא גֵר
שָׁם וְבָא בָּכָל אֹתוֹת נָפְשׁוֹ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה: (ז)
וְשָׂרֵת בָּשֶׂם ה' אֱלֹהָיו כָּכָל אֲחֵיו הַלְוִיִּם הַעֲמִידִים שָׁם לִפְנֵי
ה': (ח) חֶלֶק כְּחֶלֶק יֵאָכְלוּ לֶבֶד מִמֶּכְרֵיו עַל הָאֲבוֹת:

⁶Should a Levite from one of your towns in Israel, where he sojourns, come with all his personal desire to the place that YHWH designates, ⁷he may serve the Name of YHWH his god like all his fellow Levites who are stationed there in YHWH’s presence. ⁸They shall consume like portions irrespective of his patrimony.³

The beginning of the chapter (18:1) refers to the clergy as הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם, a strange term that first occurs in 17:9 and 18. A literal translation would be “the priest/Levites,” pointing up the ambiguity of the pairing. In the historical books Ezra/Nehemiah and Chronicles, the two terms are separated by “and” in most cases, making it clear that “priests and Levites” are two distinct groups. Might the pairing here

suggest that *all* Levites (“the entire tribe of Levi,” 18:1), irrespective of specific lineage, may potentially serve as priests?⁴ [Yevamot 86b](#) reports the contrary opinion of Yehoshua b. Levi: “In twenty-four places in the Bible the priests are called Levites,” citing Ezekiel 44:5 as proof.⁵ [Bahya ben Asher](#) comments that “the Levite” cannot denote an *actual* Levite because 18:7 says, “he may serve the Name of YHWH his god.” “The priest is the one who serves, not the Levite,” says Bahya, harmonizing Deuteronomy’s cult functionaries with their Priestly confrères.

A different reading of verse 6, however, suggests that there are Levites who reside in Israelite towns—performing some Levitical functions there—who may wish to participate in the activities of the central cult site. They are authorized to do so as visitors on a par with their peers who are stationed there. The rabbis explain the actions here in relation to the 24 [priestly courses](#) (משמרות), which are anachronistic for Deuteronomy.

The 16th-century kabbalist Isaac Luria establishes a surprising but reasonable connection between “the Levite” sojourner here and the itinerant Levite who serves as a priest for Micah’s private cult in Judges 17-18. Two textual details facilitate the connection. First, the use of the singular with the definite article (“the Levite”) prompts traditional interpreters to seek specificity, viz., *which* Levite? Second, the language of sojourning (גר) is common to Judg. 17:7 and Deut. 18:6:

Deuteronomy 18:6

וְכִי יָבֹא הַלֵּוִי מֵאֶחָד שְׁעָרֶיךָ מִכָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הוּא גֵר שָׁם
Should a Levite from one of your towns in Israel,
where he sojourns...

Judges 17:7

וַיְהִי נֶעַר מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה מִמְּשַׁפַּחַת יְהוּדָה וְהוּא לְוִי וְהוּא
גֵּר שָׁם

There was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah from a family of Judah who was a Levite who sojourned there.

The Lurianic tradition, in his collected *Liqqutei Torah* (also quoted twice in Isaiah Horowitz's compendious *Shenei Lufot Haberit*), asserts: "There is here [in Deut. 18:6] a marvelous allusion to an actual Levite, namely the young Levite who was Micah's priest."⁶ And then, based on a remarkable comment in [Bava Batra 109b](#), Luria identifies the *anonymous* Levite in Judges 17 with the *named* Levite, Jonathan ben Gershom ben Manasseh [sic], who served as priest to the Danites (Judg. 18:30).

The biblical author treats the actions of the Levites in Judges 17-18 as beyond the pale, characteristic of the chaotic time when "there was no king in Israel" (Judg. 18:1, etc.). I would propose, rather, that while the behavior of these itinerant Levites-for-hire was *normal* in early Israel, it was condemned and superseded by the rise of centralized monarchic and priestly authority, as exemplified by the phrase, "the place that YHWH designates" in Deut. 18:6.

The case of Jonathan ben Gershom ben Manasseh is extraordinary. In biblical manuscripts and printed editions, the *nun* of Manassah is raised and suspended, indicating that *נמשה* was a substitute for *משה* (Moses). According to [Rashi](#), "for the sake of Moses' honor the *nun* was written in order to change the name, and it was suspended in order to indicate that it was not Manasseh, but Moses." So the anonymous Levite was none other than Moses's grandson! The Gemara explains that he was called "Manasseh" because his actions were like those of the idolatrous Judean king of that name (2 Kings 21).

Now the Lurianic interpretation, following Bava Batra, connects the dots from Judges 17 and 18 back to Deuteronomy 18, offering some consolation to Moses's compromised lineage: "It is not right to condemn [Jonathan] because he did not intend to commit idolatry. Rather, he erred in his understanding of the rabbinic saying, 'one may commit idolatry (*עבודה זרה*) in order not to be dependent on charity.'"

Although *עבודה זרה* is the idiomatic term for "idolatry," in this case it was supposed to be taken literally as "strange work," meaning work that was alien to him (Bava Batra 110a).

Jonathan's misunderstanding led him to become an idolatrous priest. If he were to return to the fold, says Luria, he would be entitled to his share of the priestly portions along with his fellow Levites (Deut. 18:8). Why did Jonathan go astray? Because of his patrimony (thus interpreting *ממכריו על האבות*, *ibid.*), referring to a unique tradition in the [Mekhilta](#) that as a condition of his marriage to Zipporah, Moses agreed to raise his first-born Gershom (Jonathan's father) in his father-in-law Jethro's idolatrous faith. "And so the matter comes full circle (*מתגלגל*)," Luria concludes: "that is how the young Levite came to be an idolator."

The sojourning Levites (*גר שם*) direct our attention to Moses's son Gershom (*גרשם*). [Bava Batra 109b](#) (as glossed by Rabbi Steinsaltz) spells out the lesson:

Rabbi Elazar says: A person should always cleave to good people, meaning one should marry a woman from a good family, as this is beneficial for the offspring of that marriage. As in the case of Moses, who married a daughter of Yitro, who was a priest of idolatry, Jonathan, who was also a priest of idolatry, descended from him.

In the somber unfolding of the Talmudic/Lurianic interpretation, the anonymous Levite of Deut. 18:6 is identified with the grandson of Moses—a cautionary figure whose descent into idolatry is the consequence of his father's intermarriage. Should he forsake his idolatry, he might yet rejoin his fellow Levites in the service of YHWH.

¹ *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), pp. 169-172.

² See Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9; Josh. 13:33.

³ The meaning of the last phrase is uncertain. See Tigay, p. 172.

⁴ Thus, e.g., Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1885), pp. 124, 146-47.

⁵ See also Rashi on Deut. 18:1

⁶ Cited from *Liqqutei Torah Nevi'im Ketuvim* (5733), p. 264; available on [Otzar HaHochma](#) (login required).