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**The Phineas Covenant
God's Everlasting Covenant with the Levitical Priesthood**

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Introduction

Throughout the Hebrew Bible YHWH reveals Himself to Israel as a covenant making God. Biblical scholars have spilled much ink debating the significance of the biblical covenants, and the extent to which their fulfillment requires a future for Israel. This discussion has been framed around the Abrahamic covenant, and its relationship to the Mosaic, Deuteronomic, Davidic and New Covenants. Conspicuously, biblical scholars have neglected any serious treatment of God's everlasting Covenant of Peace with Phinehas (Num 25:12-13), wherein God promised that the Levitical Priesthood would remain as a permanent priesthood.

In keeping with the theme of this year's conference, this paper will address the question, Does dispensationalism matter to our understanding of the Phineas Covenant? God's covenant of an everlasting priesthood with Phinehas, the son of Aaron, cannot be fulfilled by Christ, of whom it is explicitly revealed that He is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, and not according to the order of Aaron (Heb 7:11-21). Furthermore, this treatment of the Phinehas covenant will also seek to resolve questions concerning Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the New Covenant, which speaks to the perpetual occupancy of the throne of David alongside the ministry of the Levites at the altar (Jer 33:17-18). While the former is generally agreed by scholars as fulfilled by Christ, the same cannot be said for the latter. Therefore, the Phinehas covenant has direct implications

on an enduring ministry of the Levitical priesthood, in connection with the fulfillment of the New Covenant. Thus, dispensationalism does matter.

Do God’s Covenants with Israel Matter?

Reformed and dispensational theologians alike emphasize the covenants that are revealed throughout the biblical text. However, there is surprisingly little agreement between these two divergent theological camps when it comes to evaluating either their significance to Israel or their relationship to the church. Strange as it may seem, Reformed theologians, who are also referred to as covenant theologians, tend to place less of an emphasis on the explicitly articulated biblical covenants which God made with Israel, than one would expect, given their interest in the covenantal motif.¹ Conversely, dispensational theologians, whose understanding of Scripture is informed by distinguishing between the several dispensations of God, will tend to place greater emphasis on the revealed covenants of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, both seem equally convinced that covenants play an indispensable role in disclosing the Divine mind to humanity, though they cannot agree upon how they should inform the Christian’s understanding of divine revelation.

¹ The Reformed or Covenantal theologian conceives of a theological system structured around implied theological covenants that define God’s relationship to man. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes this covenantal motif as one which is structured on the basis of two covenants: “The first covenant made with man was a (covenant of works), (Gal. 3:12) wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, (Rom. 10:5, Rom. 5:12–20) upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. (Gen. 2:17, Gal. 3:10)” (WCF VII:2)

The second implied covenant that informs the Reformed theologian’s understanding of Scripture is expressed as follows: “Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, (Gal. 3:21, Rom. 8:3, Rom. 3:20–21, Gen. 3:15, Isa. 42:6) commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, (Mark 16:15–16, John 3:16, Rom. 10:6–9, Gal. 3:11) and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe. (Ezek. 36:26–27, John 6:44–45) This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed. (Heb. 9:15–17, Heb. 7:22, Luke 22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25)” (WCF VII:3-4)

Reformed theologian Michael Horton has expressed the centrality of the covenantal framework for understanding God’s relationship to man, stating: “Not only the Old Testament, but the New Testament as well, can be understood only from the perspective of God’s covenantal ways.”² Nevertheless, it is evident that the explicitly revealed biblical covenants factor into the covenantalist’s system of theology far less than they do in the dispensationalist’s. This becomes apparent when reading Horton’s treatise on eschatology, which is ironically titled *Covenant and Eschatology*. Rather than considering the implications of the concrete biblical covenants God established with His people throughout the pages of the Old Testament, Horton uses covenant as a theme or framework for arranging abstract theological concepts.³ In his systematic theology, Horton acknowledges the existence of the Sinaiatic covenant, and contrasts it with the New covenant, though he sweeps them together, stating “the one covenant of grace, which begins after the fall with God’s promise of a Savior and continues through Abraham to David and finally to Christ is administered differently in Old and New Testaments.”⁴ This sort of cursory treatment of the biblical covenants is typical of Reformed theologians.⁵

² Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 22.

³ Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 16-17.

⁴ Michael Horton, *Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011). 152-53.

⁵ Cf. Herman Bavnick, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2006), 4 Vols; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 2:354-368; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974); Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966); etc.

If they consider the biblical covenants at all, the tendency among covenant theologians is to lump them under a single heading e.g. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), considers several covenants of the Bible under the singular heading “Covenant of Redemption” after addressing the traditional Reformed theological covenants. C.f. John H. Walton, *Covenant: God’s Purpose, God’s Plan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 25, 60-61. Uncharacteristically, John M. Frame, has more recently published a brief *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 2013) in which he offers brief considerations on the following covenants: 1) Redemption, 2) Universal, 3) Edenic, 4) Grace, 5) Noahic, 6) Abrahamic, 7) Mosaic, 8) Davidic, 9) New.

In stark contrast to this, dispensational theologian J. Dwight Pentecost has expressed the significance of the biblical covenants to dispensationalism:

The covenants contained in the Scriptures are of primary importance to the interpreter of the Word and to the student of eschatology. God's eschatological program is determined and prescribed by these covenants and one's eschatological system is determined and limited by the interpretation of them. These covenants must be studied diligently as the basis of Biblical Eschatology.⁶

The biblical covenants may therefore be seen to bear upon the theology of the dispensationalist even more so than upon the covenantalist. Dispensational theologians will tend to look at each of the distinct covenants of the Bible and pay attention to such details as the subjects of the covenant—that is to say, which parties are bound together in covenant—and what are the express stipulations of each covenant in the biblical text. Because dispensationalism emerged from the Reformed tradition, dispensationalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to regard the covenantalist's implied theological covenants between God and Adam, alongside those which are expressly revealed in the biblical text.⁷ However, dispensationalists adopted different names for these covenants, sometimes referring to the covenant of works as the “Edenic covenant” and replacing the covenant of Grace, which stretches from Adam through Christ, with the “Adamic covenant.” The growing trend among dispensationalists has been to treat the Edenic

⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1964), 65.

⁷ Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology* lists no fewer than 12 covenants, beginning with three of Covenant theologians' covenants, and then proceeding with another nine: 1) Redemption, 2) Works, 3) Grace, 4) Edenic, 5) Adamic, 6) Noahic, 7) Abrahamic, 8) Mosaic, 9) Palestinian, 10) Davidic, 11) New Covenant for the Church, and 12) New Covenant for Israel. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1967), I:42.

Similarly, Cyrus I. Scofield regarded 8 covenants: 1) Edenic, 2) Adamic, 3) Noahic, 4) Abrahamic, 5) Mosaic, 6) Palestinian, 7) Davidic, and 8) New. Notes on Hebrews 8:8 in *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917).

and Adamic “covenants” either with indifference, or else to write them off as extra-biblical and generally unhelpful.⁸

Dispensationalists have reached a consensus that God’s covenants with Israel do, in fact, matter. The covenants which God made throughout the Bible reveal God’s intentions for His people, Israel. Despite that some would seek to apply the biblical covenants to the church, the apostle Paul unequivocally establishes that they are the unique possession of his countrymen and kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites (Romans 9:3-4). Elsewhere, Scripture emphatically declares concerning those very promises that “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb 6:18). Therefore, dispensationalist would conclude that God’s covenants with Israel matter to the future of Israel. They do not merely exist to offer Christians a motif for constructing a theological framework. The biblical covenants reflect God’s heart for Israel; and the extent to which the covenants remain unfulfilled, they reveal His intentions for their future.

Literary Considerations of the Biblical Covenants

Nearly all treatments of the biblical covenants by dispensationalists, as well as by the handful of covenantalists who have shown a willingness to consider them, have tended to center on the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15, 17), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:10-16), and the New covenant (Jer 31:31-34).⁹ Dispensationalists will sometimes include the Deuteronomic or Land covenant in their considerations,¹⁰ as it is the covenant by which God assured Israel permanent

⁸ Cf. Chafer, IV:156; Pentecost, 65-66; Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 526-535; and Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2005), IV:499-546.

⁹ Cf. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 65-128; Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 526-535; Renald E. Showers, *There Really is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), 55-111; Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 127-300; Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985); Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 69-81; etc.

¹⁰ Also sometimes referred to as the Horeb or Palestinian covenant.

possession of the Promised Land subsequent to their regathering and restoration from the nations to which they've been scattered (Deu 29-30). In recent decades, treatments of the biblical covenants by progressive covenantalists and new covenant theologians have begun to include consideration of the Land covenant. Though, they often regard it as a mere reiteration/renewal of the Mosaic or Sinaitic covenant.¹¹ Despite all that has been written on biblical covenants, by Evangelical theologians of nearly all stripes, next to nothing has been written on the covenant of Peace, which God established with Phineas, Son of Eleazer, whereby God vowed that the Levitical Priesthood would remain a perpetual priesthood for all of eternity (Num 25:12-13).¹²

Inasmuch as this covenant runs counter to the covenantalist's theological framework that supposes God has jettisoned national Israel, it is no surprise that they have neglected this covenant.¹³ A notable exception to this rule is the treatment offered by progressive covenantalists, Gentry and Wellum, who have acknowledged "the Israelite offerings are given to the Levites for their sustenance as a 'covenant of salt' (cf. 2 Chron. 13:5). Since salt was used in the ancient world to preserve things, a covenant of salt means one that is enduring and lasting, a permanent agreement."¹⁴ Moreover, they affirmed "the physical return from exile did not bring about a restoration of the priesthood,"¹⁵ and thus conclude that the Levitical covenant will find

¹¹ Gentry and Wellum affirm this: "In fact, Deuteronomy, rather than Exodus 34, should be viewed and understood as the covenant renewal." Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 379; Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 62-63; Paul W. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 42.

¹² Williamson has acknowledged this covenant, as have Gentry and Wellum. However, the former has subsumed this covenant under the Mosaic/Sinaitic covenant, while the latter subsumed it under the new covenant, cf. Williamson, 42, 105-106; and Gentry and Wellum, 526-528.

¹³ Williamson's rare acknowledgement of this covenant is undermined by the fact that he relegates it to a status along with the Mosaic covenant: "in any case, these priestly covenants seem to have served the same general purpose as the Mosaic covenant with which they are so closely related. . . the Priestly and Mosaic covenants, while remaining distinct, run in parallel with one another." Williamson, 105-106. However, this fails to account for biblical presentation of the Levitical covenant as parallel with the Davidic, rather than the Mosaic (Jer 33:14-26).

¹⁴ Gentry and Wellum, 527.

¹⁵ Ibid.

its fulfillment along with the Davidic covenant, in the resolution of the new covenant.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the newer collected work on progressive covenantalism, edited by Wellum and Parker, fails to even so much as mention God's eternal covenant with the Levitical priesthood.¹⁷

However, what is most remarkable is the fact that dispensational theologians have not paid greater attention to the Phineas covenant. The only exception to this is MacArthur and Mayhue's *Biblical Doctrine* which gives it equal consideration along with the rest of God's covenants.¹⁸ In fact, the section on the biblical covenants draws deeply from articles published in *The Master's Seminary Journal*,¹⁹ and is especially informed by the contribution of Irvin A. Busenitz.²⁰ Nevertheless, very few other works that consider the biblical covenants pay earnest heed to God's eternal covenant, whereby God conferred upon Phineas "a covenant of a permanent priesthood" (Num 25:13).

Did God Establish the Levitical Priesthood Forever?

Based on the dismissive treatment the Phineas covenant has received at the hands of theologians of all stripes, it is worth committing a bit of space here to the relevant passages of Scripture which speak to it. The first mention of an everlasting covenant with Levi is found in Number 18:19, where God promises to Aaron: "All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer to the Lord, I have given to you and your sons and daughters with you as an ordinance forever; it is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord with you and your

¹⁶ Gentry and Wellum, 528.

¹⁷ Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, eds. *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016).

¹⁸ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds. *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 870-880.

¹⁹ *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Vol 10 no 2 (Fall 1999).

²⁰ Irvin A. Busenitz, "Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; the Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant" in *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Vol 10 no 2 (Fall 1999), 173-189.

descendants with you.” Later, building upon this mention of an everlasting covenant, or “salt covenant,”²¹ God directed Moses to tell Phineas, son of Eleazar “Behold, I am giving him my covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and for his descendants after him, a covenant of a permanent priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel” (Num 25:12-13). Nearly 1,000 years later, God referred to this covenant when speaking to Malachi, saying: “‘And now, O priests, this commandment is for you... I have sent this commandment to you, That My covenant with Levi may continue.’ Says the Lord of hosts. ‘My covenant was with him, one of life and peace, and I gave them to him that he might fear Me; So he feared Me and was reverent before My name’” (Mal 2:1, 4-5). Very near that same time, Nehemiah also referenced “the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites” (Neh 13:29).

It can be seen from these various passages that Scripture is not at all ambiguous about the covenant God established with the Levites. Besides these, there remain several other passages that show an intimate correlation between the Davidic and Levitical covenants. The first of these is revealed in 2 Chron 13:5, which states: “Should you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by a covenant of salt?” After this, it goes on to show that wicked Jeroboam, son of Solomon and grandson of David “rose up and rebelled against his lord” (2 Chron 13:6). The significance of this is that no theologian, covenantalist or otherwise, would suggest that such rebellion nullified the covenant of salt with David. Few Christians, if any, would suggest that the Davidic covenant has been ratified, or that it will in any way, go unfulfilled. The establishment of the “salt covenant” with David seems to

²¹ The extent to which the salt covenant has been neglected, in recent years by biblical scholars and theologians, speaks to the dominance of covenantal-reformed scholarship. The most recent title published on the topic dates back to the nineteenth century, H. Clay Trumbull, *The Covenant of Salt: as Based on the Significance and Symbolism of Salt in Primitive Thought* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899).

imply that it will endure. It cannot be nullified. Yet God’s covenant with Levi is the only other covenant in the Bible that is referred to as a “salt covenant” (cf. Num 18:19).²²

However, the strongest language that draws an unmistakable connection between the Davidic and Levitical Covenants is provided by the prophet Jeremiah. There, we read: “For thus saus the Lord: ‘David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually’” (Jer 33:17-18). Moreover, God reaffirms this when he emphasizes the imperishability of His covenants with David and with Levi:

Thus says the Lord: “If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levites, the priests, My ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, nor the sand of the sea measured, so will I multiply the descendants of David My servant and the Levites who minister to Me.” (Jeremiah 33:20-22)

While covenantal scholars have taken notice of this covenant affirmation, they have almost categorically ignored any reference to the Levitical priesthood. Some have reduced it either to a re-affirmation of the Davidic covenant,²³ while others have pointed to the “day and night” language as harkening back to the Noahic covenant or some other such unnamed covenant with all of creation.²⁴ The only thing that is consistent in their treatment of these verses is their refusal to acknowledge any explicit covenant with the Levites. One progressive covenantalist has offered an explanation in order to appease critics who responded to Gentry and Wellum’s overt acknowledgement of the Phineas covenant in *Kingdom through Covenant*.²⁵ The solution he

²² Trumbull has observed: “The Lord’s covenant with Aaron and his seed in the priesthood, and with David and his seed in the kingship, is a covenant of salt, perpetual and unalterable” 18.

²³ Cf. Schreiner, 100; Oren R. Martin, “The Land Promise Biblically and Theologically Understood” in Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, eds. *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 265.

²⁴ Cf. Robertson, 19-21; Williamson, 66; McComiskey, 142; Frame, 62, 190.

²⁵ Martin, 255, 265; Cf. Gentry and Wellum, 526-528.

offered was to collapse the two covenants into a single “Davidic leader, a righteous branch, who, interestingly, is a combination of both king and priest (33:14-18 cf. Isa 9:6-7; 11-1-10; 53:1-3). This king-priest will secure a new covenant for his people—a certainty as sure as Yahweh’s covenant with day and night.”²⁶ Despite the suggestion of covenantal theologians, Scripture never presents Christ’s priesthood as a fulfillment of the Levitical office. To the contrary, the Epistle to the Hebrews makes it plain, for any who would read it plainly, that Christ is “not called according to the order of Aaron” (Heb 7:11). “For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood” (Heb 7:14), but instead He ministers as “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6; 7:17, 21). Thus, while it can be affirmed that Jesus’ priestly ministry will endure forever, Scripture expressly prohibits conflating it with that eternal priestly service that will be rendered by the Levitical priesthood.

What is the Function of Eternal Levitical Priests?

One of the chief objections of covenantal-reformed theologians concerning the enduring ministry of the Levitical priesthood is that it aligns closely with the dispensational expectation of the reinstatement of the Levitical priesthood and the accompanying idea of Ezekiel’s temple (Eze 40-48). These concepts are next to anathema²⁷ to covenantal-reformed theologians who struggle to determine whether dispensational Christian Zionism is a strange but acceptable aberration or an altogether deviant heresy.²⁸ The point should be made clear that an eternal Levitical

²⁶ Martin, 265.

²⁷ John Stott has, in fact, said as much: “Political Zionism and Christian Zionism are anathema to Christian faith” Donald E. Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon: A Call to Partnership for Middle Eastern and Western Christians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 80.

²⁸ Philip A. F. Church, “Dispensational Christian Zionism: A Strange but Acceptable Aberration or a Deviant Heresy?” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 71 (2009), 375-98. Cf. Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-Map to Armageddon?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 19-22.

priesthood does not necessitate a form of Christian Zionism; however, it certainly does coincide in a way that may be seen to lend support and affirm the future expectation of Levitical sacrifices in the millennial kingdom.²⁹ The contention has generally centered on the sufficiency of the atonement of Christ's sacrifice, and whether there is justification for a reinstatement of a Levitical sacrifices, given the clear picture that Hebrews gives of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, upon the cross (Heb 10:1-14). However, the contrast between the two distinct priesthoods—Levitical and Melchizedek—must not be ignored. The superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood, along with the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice does not invalidate the existence of the Levitical priesthood, nor the offerings of animal sacrifices. The one does not nullify the other.

Indeed, the suggestion that Christ's atonement for sin was inadequate, or that there remains any deficiency, which can be augmented by the institution of animal sacrifices is entirely unwarranted. Scripture plainly affirms: "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb 10:4). Thomas Ice has argued that "the Levitical sacrifices of the Mosaic system are said by the Bible to 'make atonement' as well (for example, Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35, etc.). If these sacrifices in the past actually atoned for the people's sins, which of course, they did not, then they would be equally blasphemous in light of Christ's perfect sacrifice."³⁰ Ice affirms with Hullinger that "animal sacrifices during the millennium will serve primarily to remove ceremonial uncleanness and prevent defilement from polluting the temple envisioned by Ezekiel. This will be necessary because the glorious presence of Yahweh will once again be dwelling on

²⁹ Cf. Thomas D. Ice, "Why Literal Sacrifices in the Millennium" *Article Archives* (2009), 60; John L. Mitchell, "The Question of Millennial Sacrifices Part 1" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110.439 (October-December 1953), 248-267; John L. Mitchell "The Question of Millennial Sacrifices Part 2" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110.439 (October-December 1953), 342-361; Jerry M. Hullinger "The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40-48" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July-September 1995), 279-89.

³⁰ Ice, "Why Literal Sacrifices in the Millennium."

earth in the midst of a sinful and unclean people.”³¹ While this proposed solution attempts to justify the reinstatement of the sacrificial system during the millennium, it does not address the enduring ministry of the Levitical priesthood throughout eternity. In fact, Hullinger is careful to point out that: “this sacrificial system will be a temporary one in that the millennium (with its partial population of unglorified humanity) will last only one thousand years. During the eternal state all inhabitants of the New Jerusalem will be glorified and will therefore not be a source of contagious impurities to defile the holiness of Yahweh.”³² Therefore, the question as to what function the eternal Levitical priesthood would serve remains unanswered.

However, the answer to this troubling question may be offered by the biblical text, without any need for theological extrapolation. The prophet Jeremiah speaks to the perpetual ministry of the Levitical priests, saying: “Thus says the Lord: ‘David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually’” (Jer 33:17-18). The offerings which are named in Jeremiah’s prophecy include the burnt offering, sometimes referred to as the “whole burnt offering” (Lev 1:3-17), as well as “grain offerings” (Lev 2). These should not be conflated with the sin offering (Lev 4) or the trespass/guilt offering (Lev 5). Christians are prone to commit the error of a reductionistic reading of the sacrificial system, thereby viewing every sacrifice as a sin or trespass sacrifice. However, the Torah reveals that the service rendered by the Levitical priesthood was manifold. Though not insignificant, the sacrifices which they rendered for sins comprised only a small part of the totality of their ministry before the altar. Five distinct Levitical offerings are specified in the Book of Leviticus: 1) the burnt offering; 2)

³¹ Hullinger, 281.

³² Ibid., 289.

the meal/grain offering; 3) the peace offering; 4) the sin offering; and 5) the trespass offering.

Thus, a straightforward reading of the text seems to reveal that the specific offerings which the Levitical priests will render in perpetuity are not propitiatory, that is to say they are not intended to make atonement for sin. Rather they appear to be offerings of worship rendered by the Levitical priesthood, to which they were given, with consecration and thanksgiving in view.

The burnt offering was given to represent the consecration of the worshipper, as an act of self-surrender to the Lord, even unto death. It is the only sacrifice where the whole offering was consumed on the altar, with nothing returned to the worshipper. For this reason, it was sometimes called the whole offering (Deu 33:10; Ps 51:19) and is often described as providing a “sweet smelling aroma to the Lord” (Ex 29:18; Lev 1:8; Deu 33:10; etc.). The Levitical priests would often accompany the burnt offering with musical accompaniment, through stringed instruments, tambourines, trumpets, and cymbals, while lifting their voices in jubilant songs of praise (1 Chr 13:8; 25:1; Cf. 2 Chr 5:12-14; 7:4-6). Its distinction from the sin offering is evidenced by the fact that under the Mosaic covenant, it was often preceded by a sin offering or a trespass offering (Lev 6:8-7:38).

The meal or grain offering was intended partly for the Lord, and partly for the sons of Aaron who offered it on the altar. It was the offering by which the priests were to receive their portion of food (Lev 2:2-3, 10). Importantly, it was to be an unleavened offering (Lev 2:11) anointed with oil (Lev 2:4) and always seasoned with salt (Lev 2:13).³³ Like the burnt offering, it

³³ The inclusion of salt in this covenant ties directly to the salt covenant, and speaks to the permanence of God’s covenant with the Aaronic priesthood, as two parties (God and the sons of Aaron) shared the consumption of this offering: “And every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt” (Lev 2:13).

provided a sweet aroma to the Lord (Lev 2:9). Yet, it is uniquely described as “the most holy of offerings to the Lord made by fire” (Lev 2:11).

Whether one should read Jeremiah 33 as limiting the offerings to merely these two, or simply see them as indicative of the types of offerings that will be offered by the Levitical priesthood throughout all of eternity can remain a matter of debate. There is no clear indication whether the peace offering (Lev 3) or drink offerings (Cf. Ex 29:40; Num 15:4-5; etc.) will continue to be offered into eternity. However, the testimony of Scripture—namely, the epistle to the Hebrews—makes it certain that sacrifices for sin will not continually be offered throughout eternity. The once-for-all sacrifice of the Lamb of God, which was rendered according to the Melchizedekian priesthood was entirely suitable to cover all trespasses and sins (Heb 7:24-28).

Conclusion

It should be remembered that dispensationalists did not write the Levitical covenant into our Bibles, rather we read it there. Having found it repeated throughout the Old Testament, from Moses to Malachi, in Nehemiah and in Jeremiah, every responsible theologian must account for its significance, whether to cast it aside as conditional—with the destructive implication of the Davidic covenant being no less conditional—or to merge the priestly and kingly covenants into a singular fulfillment through Christ, despite the clear testimony of Scripture that Christ’s priestly service follows an entirely different tradition. Dispensationalists find themselves uniquely suited to address the significance of this biblical covenant and to consider its implications. Any theological tradition that fails to make the distinction between the two peoples of God—Israel and the Church—and that cannot account for a distinct future for Israel, according to all that God has promised her, is ill-equipped to address the question of God’s eternal covenant with Phineas and the enduring ministry of the Levitical priesthood. Thus, dispensationalism does matter.

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