



“Yhwh is Your Inheritance”: A New Look at Consecrated Life, Economic Need and the Vow of Poverty from Deut 18:1-8

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Abstract

Evangelical Poverty is considered a critical pillar of Consecrated Life. However, its demand of modesty sometimes creates the illusion of abandonment of wealth for those choosing to dedicate themselves to the Consecrated Life. With such notions, the interpretation of this vow for an individual from a poor background becomes difficult for some. This article presents the thesis that everyone, including the poor, are called to live this vow. It examines this issue from the perspective of Deuteronomy 18:1-8, a legislation on the Levitical priesthood. The author argues that the “no-allotment” legislation of the text foresees a priestly tribe with inherent financial disadvantages in the Israelite nation. However, the text further makes legislative provisions to mitigate the effects of this social burden while the Levite is at priestly service fulfilling the demands of his consecration. The author therefore proposes the Deuteronomic Levitical provisions as a model of approaching the modern African Consecrated person who must live his vow of poverty from an inherent background of economic need. The study begins with an exegesis of the text and concludes with a hermeneutic that examines Consecrated Life from the result of the Biblical exegesis.

Keywords: Levites, Allotment, Inheritance, Consecrated Life, Poverty

Introduction

Evangelical Poverty has frequently been understood in terms of simplicity and modesty that abhors living in extravagance. However, sufficient interest has not always been directed to understand this vow in the midst of lack. Understanding evangelical poverty only in terms of an invitation to live in modesty might provide the illusion that resources are always at the disposal of the one making a decision for the Consecrated life and that only those with economic buoyancy or who live in societies of such means are called to live it. To argue that those from a background of need cannot live this vow is both a disservice to the Consecrated life and a subtle display of prejudice against the economically disadvantaged and against certain parts of the world who are burdened with the harsh reality of widespread poverty.

This article addresses the question of persons who live with a burden of economic need but are also called to live Evangelical Poverty. It examines this issue through the prism of a Biblical text, Deut 18:1-8. This text is a Deuteronomic legislation on the Life and function of the Levitical priests. This is a favourite passage for reflection on Old Testament priesthood. A couple of authors have weighed in on the passage. Gerhard von Rad considers the passage's central interest as that of cult centralization.¹ The passage further expresses a humanitarian impulse of the consequence of the no-allotment legislation concerning the Levites and therefore proposes a way to take care of the Levites in priestly service.

¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, trans. Dorothea Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 112–115.

Martin Noth considers the passage as a late Deuteronomistic redaction which addresses economic concerns relating to the Levites.² Moshe Weinfeld on the other hands turns his interest in the text to the issue of priestly politics and tension in the Old Testament. He considers the text as non-Zadokite priestly text which is friendly to the Levite ideology.³ Other Biblical authors have weighed in on this text from different perspectives.⁴

I shall consider some of these perspectives while introducing the crucial issue of how this text relates to the Consecrated Life. The Levites are the priestly tribe who have been dedicated to this function with an attendant economic handicap of having no allotment among the tribes of Israel. The text offers us a prism through which we can view the

² Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 2nd ed., trans. Jane Doull et al. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 96–99.

³ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 227–234.

⁴ See for example Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 168–172.; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 295–301; Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 138–142; Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 150–158; see also idem, “Priestly Torah and the Deuteronomistic Reform,” in *Studies in Cultic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 45–67; Frank Crüsemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law*, trans. Allan W. Mahnke (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 251–256; Norbert Lohfink, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic Laws*, trans. R. David Nelson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 134–139.

modern issue of Consecrated Life in the midst of economic need. The first part of the text vv.1-2 specifies that the Levites would have no possession among the Israelites; the second part, vv.3-4 speaks about the due of the Levites and the third part, vv.6-8 is concerned with the itinerant function of the Levitical priest and his sustenance through equal sharing of goods. The text underscores the austere nature of the Levitical life which lies in their calling as a priestly tribe. It also envisages the probable difficulties that this demand will create and therefore, makes a provision for their upkeep.

Going through this text, my objective is to underline the inherent economic disadvantage of the Levitical tribe which they carry into the priestly service in the midst of the Israelite nation. The no-allotment legislation on the tribe also inspired the welfare legislations that ensure the continuity of their service as priests in Israel. The welfare legislations allot to them portions of sacrifice which ensure food security. Again, the mandate on the equality of allocation of portions to the Levites in temple service ensures that the itinerant nature of the Levitical life does not become a handicap to their life and welfare. This legislation on Levitical priesthood is an example of how to conceive poverty in the Consecrated Life today, especially from the view point of those who suffer the handicap of societies with harsh economic environment and widespread material poverty.

The article is divided into two major sections: Exegesis and Hermeneutics. In the first section of exegesis of text, I shall examine the implication of the no-allotment legislation on the economic state of the Levites contained in vv.1-2. Further, the due of priests considered their rights in vv.3-4 will form an

object of my interest and finally, the itinerant nature of Levitical life together with methods to mitigate their welfare problems will conclude my inquiry in the first section. In the section of Hermeneutics, I shall study key implication of this text on the Consecrated life, especially in its expressions on the African continent today. In all, I shall underline that the Deuteronomic text offers an example of how to protect an economically disadvantaged group whose condition could portend a danger to their consecration and service. Consecrated Life could benefit from this worldview in protecting economically underprivileged individuals or groups who need to carry out the mission and apostolate that their calling demands.

1. Priestly Service and the Demand of Austerity: An Exegesis of Deut 18:1-8

1.1. The No-Allotment Legislation for the Levites: vv.1-2

v.1a: The levitical priests, the entire tribe of Levi, shall have no allotment or possession within Israel

The expression *kōhānīm halwiyyim* (levitical priests) is quite common in the Hebrew Bible. The expressions *cohen* and *levi* occur in about 99 verses of the Hebrew Bible and there is something significant in their occurrences. The vast majority of their occurrences are found either in Deuteronomistic Literature or Priestly writings. In the Pentateuch, the vast majority of the occurrences are in the book of Deuteronomy (Deut 17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9) and only twice outside this book (Exod 32:21; Num 3:32). Even at this, the expression “levitical priest” properly occurs only

in the book of Deuteronomy because the expression in Exodus and Numbers are not adjectival qualifications of the term "priests" (*kōhānīm*) by "levitical" (*lwiyyim*) but rather a reference to the Levites in reference to the priesthood. The impression given in both Exodus and Numbers is that the Levitical priesthood is under the direction of priests linked to Aaron. This is of no surprise since Aaron himself is assumed to be from the tribe of Levi. Aaron and his sons have been specifically chosen to serve as priests in Exod 28:1. Aaron himself was from the tribe of Levi and from Exod 28:1, his family, among the tribe of Levi has been chosen to serve as priests. However, in Num 3:11-13, the entire Levitical tribe replaces the sons of Aaron chosen in Exod 28:1 as those to minister to Yhwh as priests. This transition reveals a subtle tension in the idea of priesthood in the Old Testament where there is a hierarchical system with the Aaronites at the top.⁵

⁵ The Old Testament contains a good dose of political and religious controversy around the priesthood which is revealed in the different strands of tradition found within the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy 18 and Numbers 3 appear to echo the same worldview about the priesthood while Exod 28:1 appears to be demonstrating another tradition. While Num 3 presents itself as a transition from Exod 28, there is internal evidence that this transition was probably a reaction against Exod 28:1. In Num 16-18, we find the rebellion of Korah who appears to have challenged the exclusivity of the Aaronite priesthood by saying that the entire assembly is holy (Num 16:3). Moses accused Korah and the entire tribes of Levites in this revolt of Num 16 of seeking the priesthood even when Yhwh has allowed them to approach him (*qrb*). It is arguably clear that this sort of approach is something short of the approach a priest makes in the sanctuary. Therefore, the idea that the Aaronite priests were superceded by the entire Levitical tribe as presented in Num 3 appears to be negated by the words of Moses in Num 16. It therefore suggests that these different texts: Exod 28:1; Num 3:11-13; Num 16-18 do not manifest a progression in the development of the priesthood but rather, they manifest a controversy whose

While the texts of Exodus and Numbers somewhat reveal a subtle priestly politics that subjugates the entire Levitical priesthood to the Aaronites, Deut 18 avoids this subtle controversy of classes and status in Israelite priesthood.

In Deut 18:1, we therefore find a view of the priesthood which is resolved to include the entire levitical tribe as part of the priestly class. The expression “levitical priesthood” is in resonance with the book of Num 3:11-13 which envisages the class of priesthood to belong to the entire tribe. Subsequent parts of the passage reveals this intention and understanding.

The next phrase which reads, “the whole tribe of Levi”, confirms that Deut 18 understands the entire tribe of Levites to belong to the priestly class. The expression is כל שבט לוי (*kol šebet levi*). The expression which is translated as “tribe” is שבט (*šebet*). It basically means “a scepter, a staff, a rod”. “It should be noted that in general Semitic the basic meaning of שֵׁבֶט is “stick, staff, sceptre”. The word then develops in meaning from “the sceptre of authority” to signify a group of people under the command of “the one who holds the sceptre”⁶.

vestiges are contained in these different traditions that sometimes appear to contradict themselves. The book of Leviticus also surprisingly makes no mention of Levites at all and appears to have rooted its entire priestly worldview on the Aaronites. For more on the priestly controversy in the Hebrew Bible see Anthony Giambrone, *The Bible and the Priesthood. Priestly Participation in the One Sacrifice for Sins* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids MI, 2022), 76-111. For the place of Aaronite priesthood in tabernacle worship see Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 37: Inter University Press: Downers Grove IL, 2015), 27-34.

⁶ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1388. For an in-depth study of

This “tribe shall have no allotment or possession in Israel” and the reason for this provision is directly connected to their roles as priest as given in the phrase contained in v.1b which speaks of their rights to Yhwh’s portion in a sacrifice. The expression חלק ונחלה (*hēleq wənaḥlā*) deserves a little more attention. The first word *hēleq* means “a part, a portion, a share”.⁷ It can also mean a person’s share of booty. In the context of Deuteronomistic History understood at the background of the book of Joshua as a sequel to the book of Deuteronomy, *hēleq* should mean both: a portion of land as a booty won from the conquest campaigns that Joshua was going to lead afterwards. The word *naḥlā* is also quite close in meaning to the former. This word means inalienable, hereditary property, or possession in the case of conquest, hereditary division of the property between an individual or the family as their share of the booty, consisting of lands.⁸ This expression in Deut 18:1 evokes a similar mandate given to Aaron by Yhwh in Num 18:20 who as a result of his priesthood was not meant to have any inheritance among the Israelites. The expression used in Num 18:20 is exactly the same used for the Levites in the text of Deut 18:1: *hēleq wənaḥlā*. The words *hēleq* and *naḥlā* occur together in numerous other passages in which some individuals are expected to entrust himself wholly to Yhwh as a source of survival. With regard to Aaron, this is found in Num 18:20 as

these words see, Tsevat, “חלק,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 4, 447-451; Lipinski, “נחל,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 9, 319-334.

⁷ Ludwig Koehler et al., 323.

⁸ Ludwig Koehler et al., 687.

already mentioned and for Levites we also find it in Deut 10:9 and Josh 13:33. These texts substitute Yhwh for the material benefits that should accrue to these people as a result of their membership of the Israelite nation. In Deut 10, the statement was made as a way of clarifying the status of the Levites as a tribe that replaces Aaron in his priestly function after his death. The statement of Moses in Deut 10:9 was recalled in Josh 13:33 as a reminder that Moses gave no inheritance to this tribe in the distribution that took place in the plains of Moab.

What was presented as a legal code in Deut 18:1 was applied in the actual distribution of the land by Joshua in Josh 18:7 (*kî 'ên-ḥēleq lalwiyyim baqirbakem kî-kāhunnat yāhwā naḥālātōw*) – *For the Levites have no allotment among you, the priesthood of the Lord is their possession.* Josh 18:7 links *heleq* to the idea of priesthood which the text describes as a “possession”. If the logic of Joshua 18:7 is followed, the priesthood is itself a reward for the Levites who should demand nothing more from the Israelite nation as possession.

The two terms *ḥēleq* and *naḥālā* as “allotment” and “possession” are supremely juridical judging from its appearance here, as in other texts (cf. Gen 31:14; Ruth 4:5, 10; Job 4:15) and in some cases *ḥēleq* becomes a parallel of *naḥālā* (cf. 2 Sam 20:1; 1 Kgs 12:16; Jer 10:16; Job 27:13). Their occurrence in a legal code under consideration, the Deuteronomic code, fits into the legal category under which

these words are completely comprehensible.⁹ In the codes of Deuteronomy 18, Levites were not meant to have any inheritance but other legal provisions of the Hebrew Bible reiterate this demand not only for the Levitical priesthood but also for the Aaronite priesthood (cf. Num 18:20). Therefore, while we may have evidences of tension in the relationship and status of the different classes of priesthood in the Hebrew Bible, there seems to be some form of uniformity in the legal provisions regarding their status in the ownership of property in the land of Israel. Deut 18:1 which specifies no allotment or possession for the Levitical priests mirrors the worldview of Hebrew Bible regarding priests and possession.

With specific regard to the Levites as priests, the use of the verb “set apart” for the priestly function is important in our reflection which we intend to widen to Consecrated Life in general. For now, it is enough to understand from this verse that the setting apart of the Levites within the Israelite nation comes with a certain degree of material sacrifice relating to allotment and possessions. The Levites, from the perspective of Numbers, substituted all the first borns “consecrated” (*qđš* – “set apart”) to Yhwh: *the Levites are mine for all the first borns are mine* (Num 3:12-13). This choice also gave them the function and duty of the priesthood by virtue of this

⁹ The Deuteronomic code is a part of the book of Deuteronomy which is contained in Deut 12–26. This part of the book contains what scholars usually consider the crux of the legal stipulations of the book of Deuteronomy. For a look at the Deuteronomic code see Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, trans. David Stalker (London: SCM Press, 1953); George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955). Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972);

“setting apart”. Deut 18:1 by evoking the priestly vision of Num 3 underscores the setting apart of the Levites in their priestly function as those who have a responsibility that requires them to make the necessary sacrifice of having no allotment or possession within Israel.

1.2. The Economic Rights and Dues of the Levite: vv.3-4

vv.3-4 This shall be the priests' due from the people, from those offering a sacrifice, whether an ox or a sheep: they shall give to the priest the shoulder, the two jowls, and the stomach. The first fruits of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the first of the fleece of your sheep, you shall give him

The first phrase speaks about the “due” of the priests from the people. This word translates the Hebrew word *mišpaṭ* which is strongly juridical in most usages of the Hebrew Bible. Basically, the word contains a range of meanings that align mostly within the semantic field of legal justice: “legal decision, judgement, case, law, right, claim, what is due to someone in a case.”¹⁰ The later meanings are all semantic inflections or development of the basic meaning of legal decision or judgement. The meaning of the word in Deut 18:3 aligns to the idea of “what is due to someone” in a case. This stipulation places the due of the Levitical priest firmly within the arena of legal justice and in so doing, underscores that these dues are not to be negotiated within the framework of his work as a priest but accords to the Levitical priest as of right. By choosing *mišpaṭ* over the more common *ḥōq* of the

¹⁰ Ludwig Koehler et al., 651.

book of Leviticus and Number as a word to render the idea of “due”, Deuteronomy underscores in this verse, the juridical nature of its stipulations as a code under a legal juridical system. While the word *ḥōq* is also juridical since it is a cognate of *huqqah* (divine statutes), it can also mean “customs” as a way of doing things (cf. 2 Kgs 17:19) and “customs and traditions” might probably relate to its *Sitz-im-Leben*.¹¹ There are reasons therefore to believe that *mišpaṭ* is more legally juridical and therefore more binding. This has informed its choice in transmitting the notion of “due” in Deut 18:3.

The due of Levitical priests shall come from those “offering sacrifice” whether ox or sheep (*’im-šōwr ’im-śe*). This means that one of the rightful due of priests is “animal sacrifices”. Before Deut 18, the book of Leviticus has extensively dealt with the theme of the subsistence of priests from the sacrificial system (cf. Lev 6:14-18, 25-30; 7:1-10, 28-36). Deut 18:3 mentions three parts: *zərōa’*, *ləḥī*, *qēbā*. They roughly translate as “arm/forearm, chin/jawbone, stomach” respectively.¹² However, these parts mentioned in Deuteronomy 18 do not feature in these texts of Leviticus which mention some other parts of animals. This is probably a sign that Deuteronomy 18 reflects a different priestly

¹¹ *Sitz-im-Leben* is a German phrase that means “situation in life”. In Biblical studies, this means the situation in life that served as a source of a word or an idea that is in use in Biblical literature. For more on it see Martin J. Buss, “The Idea of Sitz im Leben — History and Critique,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90, no. 2 (1978): 157-170.

¹² See corresponding parts of each entry in Ludwig Koehler et al., 280, 525, 1060 respectively.

tradition from that of Leviticus and suggests that the Aaronite tradition of Leviticus might actually be different from a probable Levitical tradition that Deuteronomy is reflecting. What matters most however, is that in these priestly traditions, Leviticus and especially Deuteronomy stipulates some parts of sacrifices as corresponding specifically to the priest; in Leviticus, to the Aaronites and in Deuteronomy to the Levites. It is also significant that these dues of the priests come directly from their area of service – worship – and not from any other mundane source. The statement is clear: priests are meant to be sustained from the fruit of their work in the temple and when these sacrifices are made to Yhwh, the people with exclusive rights to these animals, especially the parts mentioned, are the priests who are in service in the places of sacrifice.

Deuteronomy 18:4 however mentions other items that correspond to the priest in sacrifice: *rē'sīt dāgānākā, tîrōšākā, wāyīshārekā, rē'sīt gēz šō'nākā*. “the first of your grain, your wine, your oil, the first fleece of your sheep”. The phrase *rē'sīt dāgānākā, tîrōšākā, wāyīshārekā* may be confused by an interpreter. However, the *rē'sīt* (“the first of”) which begins the sentence in v.4 governs the following nouns that come after. In other words, the statement stipulates not only the first of grain, but also the first of your wine (as opposed to “your wine”), the first of your oil (as opposed to “your oil”) and of course the first fleece of your sheep which is clear from the sentence. This legal stipulation corresponds to other ancient traditions that requires the “firsts” or the “first fruits of” an item to be given or dedicated to Yhwh. The “dedication of the first” principle runs through the

Pentateuch: for plants' first produce – Exod 23:19; 34:26; Lev 23:9-14; Num 18:12-13; Deut 26:1-11; (but also see Neh 10:35-37). For dedication of the first livestock and firstborn – Exod 13:2; 22:29-30; 34:19-20; Num 18:15-18; Deut 15:19-25 (but also see Ezek 44:30). In fact, from Exod 13, 22 and 23, the dedication of the firstborn and first fruits to Yhwh was a universal principle and are considered among the earliest laws linking the first fruits to the sanctuary.¹³ One of the principal reasons for the consecration of the first fruits to Yhwh is that He is considered the sole land owner, at least according to a certain Pentateuchal tradition of Leviticus (cf. Lev 25:23), to whom the first fruits must be consecrated.¹⁴ This idea can also be extended to the notion that certain parts of the animal belongs to Yhwh. It implies that the first fruits as Yhwh's right as the principal landowner, envisages the Levitical priest as a custodian of Yhwh's rights. It is striking that while the principal land owner Yhwh decides to make the Levites the custodians of the first fruits of that land, by that same law, he prohibits them from having any allotment or direct possession of the same land that can produce the first fruits among the tribes of Israel.

¹³ For the law on first fruits see Jean-Louis Ska, *"The Law of the Firstfruits (Deut 26:1-11): A Form-Critical Study," Biblica* 71, no. 2 (1990): 165-190; Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament II/25: Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 210-212; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 5. New York: Doubleday, 1991).

¹⁴ C. Nihan argues that a certain strand of Pentateuchal tradition found in Leviticus considers this the principal reason for the laws on first fruits. See Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch*, 507.

1.3. Itinerancy of the Levite and Sharing of Goods: vv.6-8

If a Levite leaves any one of your gates, from wherever he has been residing in Israel, and comes to the place that Yhwh will choose (and he may come whenever he wishes), ⁷ then he may minister in the name of the LORD his God, like all his fellow-Levites who stand to minister there before the LORD. ⁸ They shall have equal portions to eat, even though they have income from the sale of family possessions.

V.6 speaks of a Levite leaving any of the gates of Israel. The term *šā'ar* here must be assumed to mean the gate of a city because the phrase “leaving your gate” is a Deuteronomic idiom that refers to Israelite towns (cf. Deut 12:12; 14:27).¹⁵ The Levites should not have any portion of land in Israel and this verse is a subtle allusion to that fact. “Any one of your gates” implies that their residence could be of any particular land that belongs to any other tribe. The itinerancy of the Levite life is here alluded to.

From these other towns, the Levites could migrate to a place that Yhwh will choose. The text does not specify if these Levites could have a local priestly practice from the gates they are departing from but it was clear that they should have access to priestly functions in the place where Yhwh will choose. This phrase “a place where Yhwh will choose” has significance in terms of centralization of cult in Israel. This phrase occurs more than 20 times in Deuteronomy (cf. Deut 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21; 14:23–25; 15:20; 16:2, 6, 11; 17:8; 18:6;

¹⁵ For instance, the NRSV translates the text as “leaves any of your city...”.

26:2) but "the place" remains usually unspecified. However, from the texts of Deuteronomistic History and its parallels, we get the impression that this place is Jerusalem. For example, in 1 Kgs 8:16, 44, 48, Solomon in the dedication of the temple recalls that Yhwh chose Jerusalem as the place for his name. Furthermore, the Josian reform of 2 Kgs 22–23 underlines Jerusalem as the place where Yhwhistic cult will be centralized and this led to the mass destruction of sanctuaries in other parts of Judah. If this logic of Deuteronomistic History is followed, it implies that Deuteronomy understands Levites as those with a right, possibly exclusive, to serve in Jerusalem's sanctuaries as priests. The fact that Deut 18:7 mentions that the Levites are to serve like all his fellow Levites in the sanctuary possibly underscores the exclusive nature of that right as something which belongs to the Levitical priesthood. This statement might suggest that Deuteronomy was weighing in on the priestly controversy of the Pentateuchal traditions and is underling the Levites as those with a right to that priesthood in a way which is enduring. In other words, in the future dispensations of priesthood which will unfold in the future place where Yhwh will choose, i.e. Jerusalem, the Levites are to hold the exclusive right to that service.

V.8 shows that that service retains some material privileges which follows from and adds to what has already been specified in vv.3-4 regarding the right of the Levites to sacrifices. They shall have equal portions to eat. The Hebrew phrase *ḥēleq kəḥēleq* literally means "a portion like a portion" in other words "a portion which is equal to another portion" hence the English rendering "equal portions".

However, one must inquire what the portion is in the first place. According to the text, the next phrase is *ləbad mimkārāywb* 'al-hā'ābōwt. No one is entirely sure of the correct translation of this phrase. However, *ləbad* means "apart from". Hence if we are to be quite literal it reads as "apart from what has been sold from (on) their fathers." This would suggest that the Levites could have a meagre income from their fathers which in this case would mean, their families. The nature of that possession is not entirely clear and neither is the meaning. However, the closest interpretation appears to suggest that Levites have a family possession which could be sold to help the Levites who serve in the temple.¹⁶ The Levite is under no obligation to sell this income.¹⁷ If the family inheritance is unsold, the Levite cannot also be denied of his dues in the temple.

¹⁶ Ranck summarizes the issue in this way: "There was not only to be parity between the Levites and the Levitical priests; the Levites could have material possessions to sustain them. Such property could be sold to assist them in a time of need". T. E. Ranck, 'Patrimony in Deuteronomy 18:8—A Possible Explanation,' in *The Answers Lie Below*, ed. H. O. Thompson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 281–5. Also see L. S. Wright, 'MKR in 2 Kings XII 5–17 and Deuteronomy XVIII 8,' *VT* 39 (1989): 438–48.

¹⁷ On this see S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 3rd ed., The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 218.

2. Hermeneutic of Text in the Key of Consecrated Life

2.1. Allotment and Possession of Goods: The Levitical Model and Consecrated Life

Land is the fundamental metric and determinant of wealth in ancient agricultural economies like ancient Israel. When Deut 18 removes landed property from the rights of the Levites as a result of their priestly calling and function, it removes the most fundamental basis for creation and sustenance of wealth within their reach. This principle was purely for the reason of their function as a priestly tribe. Deuteronomy and other Pentateuchal traditions therefore envisage material sacrifice for Levites for this reason. It is therefore counter intuitive to think of any Levite who is wealthy within that environment. A wealthy Levite was supposed to be an aberration because he was not supposed to possess land which is the most fundamental asset for the creation of wealth. There are a couple of evidence within the scripture to suggest that this Deuteronomic legislation on the priesthood was directed towards engendering a life of simplicity among Yhwh's priests. The removal of landed property from within their reach was only a catalyst for a far-reaching attitude of modesty that a Levitical priest and his family was supposed to observe by reasons of their consecration.

Evidence from 1 Samuel points to this. The condemnation of Eli and his family was mainly for cultic abuse of his sons which Eli as the priest and head of the family failed to stop. Even though the text does not mention this directly, Eli was most probably a Levitical priest. In 1 Sam 2:27, Yhwh said to Eli through a man of God: "*I revealed*

myself to the family of your ancestor in Egypt when they were slaves to the house of Pharaoh. I chose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest". This suggests that Eli was of the priestly tribe which we know to be Levite.¹⁸ One of the abuses of the sons of Eli was the debauchery which bordered on excessive demand from people who sacrificed in the temple. They demanded raw meat for roasting sometimes by force and then took the portion that belonged to Yhwh (1 Sam 2:15-16). Apart from the cultic abuse, their greed was apparent and was one of the reasons for their condemnation. The Deuteronomic legislation on land was supposed to inspire a life of simplicity for the Levitical priests, something which in the family of Eli was violated with impunity and with the complicit inaction of Eli, who only spoke but never took actions to stop the debauchery of his sons. The Levites have Yhwh as their only inheritance, a provision that points to a necessary trust they should retain in God's providence even when not having an abundance of material wealth.

Just like the prohibition of possession of land in Leviticus was supposed to be a catalyst for a simple life of Levitical priests, the vow of Poverty for the Consecrated Life today is clearly a vow that has far more reaching implications than not possessing goods or wealth. This vow requires simplicity for the religious where the non-possession of wealth is only a prophetic sign of an attitude that has a strong

¹⁸ Also according to 1 Chronicles Eli's descendant **Ahimelech** (and later **Abiathar**) were priests descended from **Ithamar**, one of Aaron's sons (as opposed to Zadok, who descended from Aaron's other son, Eleazar). This makes Eli an **Ithamarite priest** — thus a **Levite** from the priestly branch of Aaron's family.

bearing on simplicity. The Vatican II decree on the adaptation and renewal of the Religious life *Perfectae Caritatis* says that "the religious should banish all undue solicitude (care) and trust themselves to the providential care of their father in heaven" (*Perf. Carit.* 13). It is an exhortation not to chase unnecessary concerns that relate to wealth which is distracting to a full dedication to the cause of the Gospel. This attitude is not only individual but collective because the Religious Congregations or Orders are advised to avoid every appearance of luxury, excessive wealth and the accumulation of goods (*Perf. Carit.* 13). The Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Vita Consacrata*, also posits that "today more than in other ages, the call of evangelical poverty is being felt also among those who are aware of the scarcity of the planet's resources and who invoke respect for and the conservation of creation by reducing consumption, by living more simply and by placing a necessary brake on their own desires" (*Vit. Cons.* 90). This implies that the simplicity which the religious today is called to live is not meant only for themselves but it is to be directed to the conservation of creation in a culture of excessive waste. Moreover, it also serves as a prophetic witness to others who are disposed to perpetuate this culture. Many founders of Consecrated Life Institutes have embedded simplicity within their charisms transmitted to their members as a way of promoting effective mission and apostolate. For instance, St Anthony Mary Claret, in his Autobiography, said "I have no money, but then I have no need of it...I didn't need it for meals because I begged for them wherever I went (*Auto.*

Biog. 361).”¹⁹The words of Claret portray an unshakable trust in providence even in the midst of little material resource.

The Consecrated person today is called to learn to trust in divine providence even when there is little material security for the future. This trust in divine providence was expressed in the Levitical priestly mandate and life through the maxim “Yhwh is your Inheritance”. Having little or living simply therefore points to something deeper: an unshakable trust in God who ultimately takes care of the Consecrated person. This disposition is actually the whole point of the vow of Poverty. It is a vow that reminds the Consecrated person that God is ultimately the owner and protagonist of the mission who knows how best to take care of it. For that reason, entrusting the mission to Him also means entrusting the material welfare and needs of that mission to him. Those needs include the welfare of the Consecrated missionary who sees in God the principal missionary that sends the poor evangelizers to work on his behalf and in his name.

2.2. Levitical Priestly Welfare vis-a-vis Subsistence Through Consecrated Life Missions

The Levitical priests are prohibited from possessing lands but at the same time, the Deuteronomic legislation makes provisions for the care and welfare of the Levite especially within the framework of his priestly functions. However, it makes provisions for the care of the Levitical welfare at two levels: food security and sharing in possession. The former

¹⁹ St Anthony Mary Claret, *Autobiography* (Claret Publishing Group: Owerri, 2015), 201.

provision is found in vv.3-4 and the later in vv.6-8. In the former provision, the legislation foresees the need the levites will have regarding food and subsistence and therefore recommends that certain parts of animals sacrificed to Yhwh shall belong exclusively to the Levitical priests. In the latter provision, the Deuteronomic legislation foresees that the itinerant nature of the Levitical life, based on their non-possession of land, will present a peculiar kind of need whose unsatisfaction could lead to serious problems of social and economic integration within the Israelite nation. For this reason, the provisions of vv.6-8 provide for a law in which the Levite, even when a sojourner, is inserted into a system in which his needs are catered for while at priestly service. The provision was mainly done through a communitarian sharing of goods that ensures that every Levite feels catered for and equal to a fellow Levite with whom he shares a service in a place of priestly service. I shall consider the first level of welfare since I shall dedicate the next section to reflect on the communal sharing of goods from the view point of the text in relation to Consecrated Life.

Member of Institutes of Consecrated Life should feel the sort of economic security and protection which the Levites enjoyed. *Perfectae Caritatis* stated that "Religious communities have the right to possess whatever is required for their temporal life and work, unless this is forbidden by their rules and constitutions" (*Perf. Carit.* 13). In *Vita Consacrata*, Pope John Paul II said that "Consecrated persons fight to overcome hunger and its causes; they inspire the activities of voluntary associations and humanitarian organizations; and they work with public and private bodies

to promote a fair distribution of international aid” (*Vit. Cons.* 89). It would be absurd for Consecrated persons to fight structures of poverty and hunger while they are constantly subjected to that same condition because of their work. Most Religious Orders or Institutes provide, through their constitutions, for the need to cater for the temporal needs of their members, in so far as such exercises do not violate the requirements of modesty which their profession of poverty requires. This provision should have practical implications which the administration and leadership of each Institute should never ignore. Each apostolate should be provided with enough resources for sustenance of the members in that mission. Economic administrative structures should be generated and applied in a way which is consistent with the rules of the Institute and the satisfaction of the basic needs of its members. A further implication is that Orders and Congregations should dedicate more funds to an apostolate in a poorer region of the world with a sense of obligation and not a sense of favor. The dedication of funds for the maintainance of an apostolate, especially in poorer regions, should be defined within the framework of rights and obligations and not within that of expediency and convenience. The dedication of parts of animal sacrifice to Levites was an ancient economic administrative system that did the same. Therefore, Institutes should ensure that their members do not become destitutes and should avoid a justification of such conditions with an invalid argument that relates to their vow of poverty. The vow of poverty is meant to engender modesty and simplicity but not destitution.

The need for this reflection has become even more exigent in the face of newly founded Institutes, especially in Third World regions where the means for sustainance of such Institutes have become an abiding challenge. In the face of economic difficulties that could subject members to levels of destitution and misery, some of these newly founded Institutes come up with questionable solutions that neither observe the basic demands of dignity of its members nor align with the basic traditions of Consecrated Life as we know it in the Church. Instances are given of members of new Institutes under formation who pay fees to be approved for the next stage of their formation or even ordinations. In some female Institutes, young members are subjected to situations that compromise their dignity, chastity or even the vow of obedience. A well-structured system of material subsistence for the Consecrated person ensures a better fidelity to the Consecrated life. A lack of it renders the foundations of the life shaky and at the worst, scandalous. This issue should remain a central concern for Institutes especially those without a well-defined system of financial administration or those with weak economic base and fundamentals.

2.3. Communal Sharing of Goods: The Levitical Model and Consecrated Life

Levites, by the social configurations of the legal codes of the Pentateuch, are natural sojourners. They do not have a land and cannot lay claim to any piece of real estate. For this reason, Deut 18:6-8 foresees the possible itinerant nature of their priestly function as something with social and economic

consequences. However, it did not abandon Levites to their fate but made a provision for their welfare through the provisions of this text. This system allows Levites to minister in the sanctuary which the Lord shall choose while having equal portions to eat even when sharing resources together. This system provides for a sustenance generated from the place of service like the temple or some other sanctuary where the Levite is of service. Again, the right of the Levite is equal to that of the other Levites who minister in the same place.

Institutes of Consecrated Life have very diverse charisms and apostolates that sometimes lend themselves to peculiar sorts of difficulties in carrying out their missions. The Deuteronomic legislation understood the difficulty that would emerge from the lifestyle proposed to the Levites through its codes and the provision of Deut 18:6-8 was meant to mitigate it. Every Consecrated Life Institute should be avidly aware of the strains that its charisms could bring to the social and material welfare of its members and should make sure that its Constitutions, Chapters and administrative decisions do not ignore them. While most religious Orders and Congregations retain a high esteem for simplicity that sometimes borders on mortification, such attitudes should never cross the line of destitution. Again, Institutes should be aware of the differences that exist between a legitimate demand for modesty and a compulsory requirement for an austere life which the Institute does not demand as part of its charism. Once this demand is illegitimately made compulsory, then the Religious Institute is crossing a line that compromises the welfare of its members. *Perfectae Caritatis* recommends an attitude which evokes the Deuteronomic legislation on the

Levites: "The several provinces and houses of each community should share their temporal goods with one another, so that those who have more help the others who are in need." (*Perf. Carit.* 13) Just like Levites are encouraged to be contributors to their own welfare through communality, this document encourages religious Institutes to understand the power of communal distribution of good in ensuring welfare for each member. In the document *Evangelica Testificatio*, Pope Paul VI was more direct in his demands for honest sharing of goods as a means of welfare care for the religious:

"The necessity, which is so imperative today, of fraternal sharing must preserve its evangelical value. According to the expression in the Didache, "if you share eternal goods, with all the more reason should you share the goods that perish." (33) Poverty really lived by pooling goods, including pay, will testify to the spiritual communion uniting you; it will be a living call to all the rich and will also bring relief to your needy brothers and sisters". (*Evang. Test.* 21)

These documents provide discomfort for any religious, especially in the poorer regions of the world, who has become accustomed with a life configured by individualism, especially when such religious find the comfort of a good job and the good life that comes with it. Such consecrated persons should understand that their Institutes are sustained by the sacrifice of others who send funds to that regions. That same sacrifice is demanded from them in the form of continuous contribution, no matter how meagre, to the common purse of

their Order or Congregation for the sustenance of their apostolate. The Consecrated Life should be a living witness to the world on the possibility of sustenance in the midst of little, something which many societies in the world has struggled to implement.

2.4. The African Consecrated Person: A Witness to the African Society

For the African Church to set itself on a continued path of growth and progress, it needs to ensure communion and dialogue among its members (cf. *Africae Munus* 88-95). The Consecrated Life can offer a path that others can follow. Again, our society is fragmented and there are fault lines that exist from tribe, religion and political affiliations. The poverty in the continent has in many cases, been due to the greed and corruption that stems from these fault lines. A greater disposition for a more equitable distribution of wealth will see to a rapid solution to most of Africa's economic woes. In this sort of milieu, the evangelical counsel of Poverty lived through community life provides a prophetic voice that the society is in desperate need of. Community life shows that a group can survive and thrive in a lack of abundance and that such a situation could be created with an evangelical disposition to share resources which one could have privately appropriated.

In Religious Institutes, especially those that need to grapple with the dire economic conditions of the Continent, communion among its members becomes even more necessary. Usually, Institutes with financial problems focus on

viable economic projects that could sustain their mission going forward. However, similar amounts of attention is not given to the need to make members understand the spiritual and material rewards of a good community living. The first step of every Institute in consideration of its finances, especially for the less economically viable, is to let members go back to the roots of their community living which invites them to the important disposition of sharing of goods, whether plenty or scarce. The Levitical example of Deuteronomy 18 provides us with a template: when we need to live together with scarce resources, our focus on the common good expressed in communal sharing becomes indispensable.

Institutes of Consecrated Life, who are growing in numbers in Africa, could offer the African Continent a prophetic example of how to contribute and redistribute goods in equity and justice. Our continent is generally described by the rest of the world as poor and yet we know that the resources for wealth creation is found much more in abundance in the Continent than in any other part of the world. The greatest resource for wealth creation is the human resource and African population is not only huge but is growing faster than any other continent of the world.²⁰ Africa

²⁰ According to UNICEF, the world is increasingly becoming African. In the statistic prepared by Matthew Cummins, social policy regional adviser for UNICEF, in 2023, it states: “The population growth rate in East and Southern Africa (2.1%) – and Sub-Saharan Africa (2.5%) more broadly – is significantly faster than in Europe (-0.1%), North America (0.6%), Asia (0.7%), Latin America (0.8%), and the Middle East and North Africa (1.5%). By the end of the century, more than one out of every three people in the world will be living in Sub-Saharan Africa, up from just 15% today (Figure 3). Most of those gains will be at the expense of shrinking populations in Asia”. Matthew Cummins,

is home to the most abundant natural resources in the world. Therefore, the poverty in the Continent is man-made. The verifiable corruption of most African states has one major consequence: the frenzy for stealing public goods which is the hallmark of individualism and a life far removed from any concerns for the common good. A prophetic living of community life could provide a needed change and could make the voice of the Church more eloquent and persuading for our societies to change. We could become a mirror *for* our society instead of being a mirror *of* our society.

2.5. Itinerancy and Immigrant Consecrated Persons from the Global South

The itinerant nature of the Levitical priesthood is captured in vv.6-8 which proceeds with a provision on the welfare of the Levite in such positions. It recommends equal portions for every Levite while carrying out the service of his priestly consecration. This underscores equality in the apportionment of welfare and the attendant psychological effects this may have in the self-esteem of the Levite. No Levite is to be given more than the other and no one is to be denied more than the other even when there is an income from his father's house. The recommendations of this verse has far reaching implications on how to interpret the life of an African Consecrated person who desires to live his consecrated

Demographic Facts about Eastern and Southern (Africa) 2023 Update.
https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/12146/file/Demographic_Fast_Facts_2023%20Update.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

vocation outside the shores of the continent, especially in more prosperous areas.

The Universal nature of the Church implies that anyone has the right to aspire to mission anywhere in the world as a result of his calling as a Consecrated person. Moreover, the inherent economic hindrances in the global south naturally means that immigrants from the south migrate to the global North for safer havens and greater economic prospects. Some of these people, African, Asians, Latinos, etc. who migrate could receive their calling in their new social setting where their background of deprivation could engender some or extreme degrees of prejudice. Many Congregations and Orders have come a long way in integrating different cultures to their charismatic heritage and communities but a lot still needs to be done. No consecrated person should ever suffer any sort of prejudice with regard to consideration of issues regarding their welfare. The Levitical maxim of equal portions at service should be extended always to every consecrated person irrespective of origin. Care should be taken to ensure that welfare and needs are not stifled because of considerations of background. Except someone has taken actions that compromise a natural reposition of trust, welfare should be extended to the area of apostolate where responsibilities are not reserved for people based on background or race. There are still responsibilities that many International Orders and Congregations are slow to entrust to members from the global south. If such tendencies are motivated by considerations of origin, as opposed to merit and competence, then we need to take a cue from the Levitical legislative provision of Deut 18:6-8, and understand that

equality builds a collective psychological welfare that leads to progress for the Institute. If we continue to relegate people based on their origin, progress cannot be ensured for the mission and the apostolic charity that should drive the mission would be lacking. The Levites are all from one tribe and every consecrated person is from the same tribe built with faith in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

The effect of social realities on the observance or violation of religious vows is a most recent and current area of research in the theology and science of Consecrated Life. This paper offers a view on one aspect of the numerous questions that this area of research poses to researchers: Economic poverty in relation to the living of the Evangelical Vow of Poverty. It concludes that economic situation cannot render one's vocation to the observance of Evangelical Poverty questionable. The integrity of the Consecrated Person can only be assured when the requisite steps and efforts are made both by the individual who has chosen this life in the midst of lack and the Religious Community which accepts the Consecrated person in the such situations. The article proposed that Consecrated Life Institutes are to establish legislative norms, in imitation of the Levitical law of Deut 18, to protect the integrity of the one handicapped with material poverty but called to live the Evangelical poverty. This ensures both the esteem of the person and protection of his welfare while living the life. On the other hand, individuals should understand the need for a sound Community living expressed in the

willingness to contribute to the common welfare of every other religious in the community. This ensures that scarce resources are both well managed and enough for all those in the Evangelical community. The Levitical legislation encouraged distribution of good and members of Institutes of Consecrated Life should understand the sharing of goods as an obligation rather than an act of convenience and choice.

Consecrated Persons need freedom to express and live their lives outside their countries. The itinerant nature of the Levitical life saw to the provision of legislations that protected the right of a sojourning Levite. This is proposed as a necessary system for Consecrated Life Institutes. No religious should be subjected to shame or to the continuous stripping of self-esteem that relates to the person's provenance or economic status. God invites every Consecrated person to this life and the dignity of the life depends on God's vocation and commission rather than human assessment and evaluation. Consecrated Life which is aligned to the values of human dignity sees to a better observance of the vows which remains the pillars of the Consecrated Life.

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