The main aim of this study is to expose the legal way of thinking that underlies key passages in the book of Numbers, especially in relation to the role of the Levites. Three principal points will be made. First, the Levites are appointed by God not in order to serve the priests, as it may seem, but rather to serve God, and make the functioning of the cult possible. This distinction is discerned through two legal acts presented in the biblical text. One is the definition of the Levites as ntwynym, and the other by fixing the share—nhlh—of the priests and Levites respectively through the use of the term mtnh. Secondly, the first point will be clarified further by comparing the terminology concerning the assignment of the Levites with the tidennūtu documents from Nuzi. Thirdly, I contend that in Numbers we find an attempt to describe the formation of the Israelite society in a way parallel to the kinship system in Nuzi as described by K. Grosz. This social formation, presented in legal terminology shared by ancient Near Eastern (ANE) societies, is a part of the prospected inheritance allotted to the community of Israel. This tendency derives from the priestly writer’s desire to present the inheritance of the land of Canaan by the Israelites as a legal act, performed by God on behalf of his people.

The book of Numbers reads like a mixture of different accounts. It

seems that the book mainly reflects the traditions of the Priestly source, with a little reliance on other sources. Indeed, the different stories have a common denominator: the future life of the Israelite society in the land given to it by God. The different events taking place in the desert prepare the Israelite society to receive its inheritance in the Lord’s land.

From ch. ii onwards, following the first census, the cult becomes one of the main concerns in the book of Numbers. The Levites are assigned to perform tasks in the Tabernacle and to protect it, and they function under the supervision of the priesthood, comprised of one family, the descendants of Aaron (iii 5). Further, the book aims at ensuring that this form of relations and division among the two groups is for generations to come, and thus it is the inherited share of those two groups that is emphasized (xviii 20-1). This relationship between the priesthood and the Levites will be a main focus of this study.²

1. The Relevant Texts

The book of Numbers deals with the duties and rights of the Levites and the priests in chs iii, iv, vii, xvi, xvii, xviii, xxv. In these passages a new arrangement regarding the cult is introduced. The Levites are assigned to the sanctuary, an act which has an implication for the priesthood. The priests, who were consecrated in Exod. xxviii-xxix and again in Lev. viii, are still challenged by other families of the tribe of Levi, and therefore, in contrast to Exodus and Leviticus, Numbers is concerned primarily with the status and the inheritance of the priests, and not with their performance.

I shall limit the study below to Num. iii, iv, vii 5-26, and xviii.³ It is clear that these four chapters constitute three different kinds of texts. Chs iii and iv are one unit which may be called “the conscription”. They include two kinds of census of the Levites and an explanation of the tasks which the different families of the tribe are assigned to do.

---
² It was generally accepted that the Priestly source and the Deuteronomic source describe the relationship between the priests and the Levites differently, and that they reflect different traditions. However, since I intend to focus on the Priestly source, I shall not go into that problem here. For a review of opinions and a new understanding of the Deuteronomic source see R. Abba, “Priests and Levites in Deuteronomy”, VT 27 (1977), pp. 257-67.
³ Chs xvi-xvii and xxv, concerning the priestly family ensuring that the chosen ones are Aaron and his seed, are in my view aetiological-legendary accounts. Since my aim is to show the legal background of the relationship between the two groups I chose not to include them in this study.