

Who were the Nethinim?

Nethinim means “given ones” or “those set apart.” The Nethinim were a group of servants tasked with assisting the Levites in service of the temple. The Nethanim did the menial work required in temple operations, such as wood-cutting and water-carrying. Most translations of the Bible refer to this group as “temple servants.” Older translations such as the KJV transliterate the word as “Nethinims.”

The precise origin of the Nethinim is a bit unclear. Ezra 8:20 mentions the Nethinim as a group set apart by David to assist the Levites. Some theorize that the Nethinim originated with the Midianites; after Israel conquered the Midianites in battle, God told Moses to select certain “people, cattle, donkeys, sheep or other animals. Give them to the Levites, who are responsible for the care of the Lord’s tabernacle” (Numbers 31:30). This group was later augmented by the Gibeonites, whom Joshua enslaved after they deceived him into making a treaty with them. Joshua 9:26-27 says, “So Joshua saved [the Gibeonites] from the Israelites, and they did not kill them. That day he made the Gibeonites woodcutters and water carriers for the assembly, to provide for the needs of the altar of the Lord at the place the Lord would choose. And that is what they are to this day.” Whatever their origin, it seems the Nethinim ultimately became a diverse group.

Nethinim are mentioned in 1 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah in relation to the Jews’ return from exile. The temple servants were granted the same protection from taxes by King Artaxerxes as the priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, and other workers at the temple (Ezra 7:24). These servants were also involved in the rebuilding of the wall, making repairs in the area where they lived (Nehemiah 3:26). Nehemiah 10:28-29 includes the Nethinim among those who vowed to follow God. Nehemiah 11:21 says, “The temple

servants lived on the hill of Ophel, and Ziha and Gishpa were in charge of them.”

The Nethinim are not mentioned in the New Testament. Most scholars believe the Nethinim were absorbed into the general Jewish population or possibly were assimilated within the Levitical tribe. Some Talmudic writers spoke of Nethinim with contempt, treating the group as social outcasts and restricting whom they could marry. This distaste for a group involved in sacred service to the Lord was likely due to concerns about the group’s Gentile ancestry. Today, Jehovah’s Witnesses use the term Nethinim to refer to elders serving immediately under the Governing Body.