

PRIESTHOOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WHAT IS A PRIEST?

A priest is an authorized mediator who offers sacrifice to God on behalf of others.

In the Old Testament there were three types of priesthood;

1. The Patriarchal Period;
2. Israel, a Nation of Priests
3. The Levitical Priesthood

We'll look at each of those.

1. THE PATRIARCHAL PERIOD

In this period there was no professional class of priests. The father (the patriarch) was the priest of the family, offering sacrifice on behalf of the family. Sacred actions of the patriarchal priest included building altars, planting trees, offering sacrifice and erecting pillars. It is from this tradition of priests that the priesthood of today traces its background to the "father" in the family.

The first person to be called priest in scripture is Melchizedek. He offers bread and wine to Abram and then gives his blessing to Abram and his men.



Melchizedek giving his blessing to Abram and his men.

2. ISRAEL, A NATION OF PRIESTS

In Exodus God says "Israel is my firstborn son" and then later in the book of Exodus, God states, "firstborn sons are consecrated to the Lord's service." So Israel is now a nation of priests, and they will remain that way "if you obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be my special possession" (Exodus 19: 5-6). However, when Moses goes up the mountain to speak with God and receive the commandments, upon returning, Moses is distressed by the fickleness of his people and cries out: "Who is for Yahweh? To me!" The Bible notes that all the sons of the tribe of Levi come at the beckoning of Moses and, following his orders, they slaughtered about three thousand idolaters and bring the revolt to a halt. Moses applauds the

Levites and rewards their zeal by stating that their entire tribe would be the priestly tribe of Israel. The aforementioned blessing of the firstborn son, is forfeited to the Levites, who became the people set aside for priestly service.



Der HERR strafte durch Moses die Abgötterei des Volks.

Hör zu mir wer dem HERRN angehört! Da sammelten sich zu ihm alle Kinder Israhel, und er sprach zu ihnen: so spricht der HERR der GOTTES Israels: gürte ein jeglicher sein Schwert auf seine Hüften, und danksaget hin und wieder von einem Thier zum andern im Lager, und erwirge ein jeglicher seinen Bruder, Freund und Nächsten.

18. 2Mo. 32. 26. 27.

Levites coming to the service of the Lord and destroying the golden calf.

3. LEVITICAL PRIESTHOOD

Because the Israelites decided to break the covenant and worship the golden calf, there needed to be a renewal of this covenant. It was first renewed with Moses, then extended to Aaron as he was consecrated as high priest. “God only then commanded Moses to speak to Israel about the types of sacrifice (burnt, sin, peace) that Aaron and his sons would be instructed to offer on the people’s behalf according to the priestly code (Lev 1-16). Finally the holiness code was given for the Levitical priests to instruct the twelve tribes of Israel (Lev 17-26)... This system of priestly mediation based on the hierarchical order of Moses, Aaron (and his sons), the Levites and the twelve tribes of Israel continued through the history of Israel until the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D.”

This brings in the question: who would be considered a Hebrew Priest? Some might think that since Levi was the priestly tribe than all Levites could be rightly considered as priests of the Lord. Such an explanation, however, would be misleading. For, while Moses did consecrate the tribe of Levi to act as the priestly tribe of Israel, not all were allowed to perform the properly priestly functions. Thus there was a kind of hierarchy within the priestly class. The only Levites who could be legitimately called priests would be the direct descendants of Aaron. And from among these priests were chosen the high-priest or the ruling priest who would govern over the other priests. The rest of the Levites then were not priests per se but were assistants to the

priests as commanded by Moses.

This unique task, given to them by the Lord, affected the entire lives of all of the Levites. There was a greater need to be ritually pure: for example, priests were not allowed to drink wine nor could they attend funerals (unless it was a close relative). Moreover, this idea of being set apart for God was also shown in the fact that they received no land, for their inheritance was the Lord. Some of the basic functions of being ministers of the sanctuary included: guarding the sanctuary, looking after the furnishings, and transporting the tabernacle.



Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant

In all of the periods of the Old Testament the priest retained the same purpose, as an authorized mediator who offers sacrifice to God on behalf of others. However, as it developed the who was an authorized mediator went through several changes.

Bib: "Priest, Priesthood." In *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, ed. Scott Hahn, 725-730. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

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Bib

Kenny, Dan. "Priesthood in the Old Testament." At Coriesu, <http://www.coriesu.org/pretheo/Site/Priesthood.html> 5 December 12

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Dan Kenny, "Priesthood in the Old Testament, at Coriesu, <http://www.coriesu.org/pretheo/Site/Priesthood.html> (5 December 12).