

A Study of the Priesthood In the Old and New Testaments



Alex Nelemans

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The concept of priesthood

The priesthood is something found in many books of the Bible, in both the Old Testament and New Testament. The word 'priest' occurs in Genesis as well as in Revelation, and in various books between. A dictionary explains that the English word *priest* is derived from the word *presbyter*, which in turn came from the Greek *presbuteros*, meaning 'elder'. The Greek for 'priest' is *hiereus*; derived from this word is the English word 'hierarchy'. In the Bible, 'elder' is the older of the two terms and is applicable to secular as well as spiritual leadership, whereas 'priesthood' pertains to spiritual leadership only.

The Bible contains all we need to know about priesthood in relation to God, the one **true God**. **Pagan** forms of priesthood existed thousands of years ago (and still exist in certain religions), as shown in, for instance, Genesis 41 which refers to the priesthood of ancient Egypt. The pagan nations in the land God gave to Abraham (Acts 7:2-4) had temples and bowed to idols (for example in 1 Chronicles 10:9-10), and therefore more than likely had a priesthood as well. All forms of priestly activity have to do with the intervention or **mediation** between people and a power which is holier than they are, and they dare not approach it. A biblical example of this is Exodus 20:18-21.

People see a priest as someone who they think is likely to be more acceptable than themselves! They need him to represent them by his offering up their prayers, thanksgivings and sacrifices. From the time of Adam and Eve's fall, sin has separated man from God, and people have needed **mediators** (a priest is a type of mediator) to help them find **forgiveness**. There would have been no need for a priesthood of any kind if mankind had not disobeyed God!

Early Priesthood in the Old Testament

The Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament gives us insight into how priesthood in relation to God began. The oldest books of the Bible tell us

that what we might call the 'office' of priest, was occupied by the father of a family, like for example, Job (1:5) or by the head of a tribe, for his own family or for the tribe. **Abraham**, Isaac and Jacob built altars, purified and consecrated themselves and their households; Genesis 12:7, 13:18, 33:20, 35:1, 2. The amazing **Melchizedek** combined kingship with priesthood in his own person (Gen. 14:18-20). Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was not only the civil head or chief of his tribe, the Midianites, but explicitly also the spiritual leader or priest (Exodus 18:1, 12).

Genesis reveals that Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 35:24) was given the daughter of the priest of On as wife by the Pharaoh (king, ruler) of Egypt (41:45; 46:20). **Egyptian priests** managed their own piece of land (47:26). The Greek Scriptures, or New Testament, confirms that centuries after Joseph, "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds"(Acts 7:22). It appears that Aaron, Moses' elder brother, grew up with Moses in Egypt (Exodus 7:1-7) and that they were both familiar with the religion and priesthood of the ancient Egyptians!

The Israelite people were in Egypt for 430 years (Ex. 12:40) and Egyptian religion involved the images of many different animals. It was the experience of this idolatrous religion that was behind Aaron's and the people's idea to produce **the golden calf** (Ex. 32), which of course was an idol and therefore an abomination to God as well as to Moses. Moses destroyed the calf and God sent a plague (verses 20, 35). See also Joshua 24:14 and Ezekiel 20:8.

The Levitical priesthood introduced

The priesthood of the Israelite nation was introduced by God shortly after the deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt under Moses and Aaron. Moses and his elder brother were of the **tribe of Levi** (Ex. 6:16-27) and thus known as Levites (verse 25). Before God's appointment of Aaron and his four sons as His priests in the book of **Leviticus**, chapter 8, the earliest Israelites called priests since the exodus from Egypt are those mentioned in Ex. 19:21-25. These may have been Levites as well, or perhaps leading elders within the nation. 'Leviticus' stands for 'Matters pertaining to the Levites' in the original language.

As Exodus is the book of Israel's redemption (Ex. 15:13; 19:5-6), Leviticus is the book of the **cleansing, worship and service** of God's redeemed people. In the book Numbers (3:5-12, 44-45; 4; 8:5-26) God set apart the whole tribe of the Levites as those who would especially support the priesthood in every way. 1 Chronicles chapters 9, 15 and 23-26 explain this support in much detail! As mentioned, the priesthood was initially led by Aaron and his sons and is known as the **Aaronic or Levitical** priesthood. The purpose of this priesthood was to minister to God according to all the instructions or laws of the great covenant He established with the Israelites under the leadership of Moses. As Christians we usually refer to this covenant as the **old covenant**.

After Exodus, Leviticus is the third of five books forming what in Hebrew is known as the *Torah*. The *Torah* is believed to have been written by Moses. While much of the book is a manual of directions for the Levitical priesthood, God also inspired Moses to write about issues pertaining to purity, the holiness of God and **holiness in the people's everyday lives**. Holiness was required of not only the Levites and their families, but of the nation as a whole (the other 11 tribes) as well. The word 'holy' appears more than 80 times in Leviticus! Holiness remains the primary issue for the people of God today. The New Testament has a reference to the Levitical priesthood in Hebrews 7:11.

This priesthood was introduced by God through Moses and Aaron in about 1400 B.C. (before Christ) and remained in effect for about 670 years. It continued for about 40 years after our Lord's life on earth, until the **destruction of Jerusalem** and its temple by the armies of the Roman empire in the year 70 A.D. (*Anno Domini* : the year of the Lord), which happened in fulfilment of Matthew 23:37-39 and Luke 19:43-44; 21:20-24. A Levite is mentioned in Acts 4:36, but by then the temple was in ruins and the tribes of Israel had scattered far and wide (James 1:1)!

The Priesthood in the New Testament

The Aaronic priesthood had been a kind of concession by God to His people, in that because of sin, as individuals they had been unable to relate to Him directly. By means of Jesus' personal sacrifice, God the Father replaced it and also the old covenant between Himself and the Israelites with the supernatural, infinitely greater priesthood of God the Son and a

new covenant in His blood (Luke 22:19-20; Colossians 1:20; Heb. 8:13 and chapter 9). Not only that, the new covenant was established for the benefit of **all mankind** – something many Jews (Israelites) found hard to accept! God made this clear both in the vision He gave Peter in Acts 10:23-36, and in Ephesians 2:8-18.

As the first priest appointed by God and as leader of the sacrificial system along with him, Aaron was in a sense the first high priest: Leviticus 21:10; Heb. 5:1-4. In the **New Testament**, based on the new covenant, this title is applied to Jesus in Heb. 2:17 and 4:14-15, which uses references to Leviticus in order to clearly show **the Lord Jesus** as our, as well as God the Father's, one and only perfect High Priest. Hebrews (7:11-28) also points out that the Levitical priesthood was far from perfect, simply because the Levites and their priests were fallible and sinful human beings! See for example 2 Kings 23:5-25, Ezra 9:1, Ezekiel 44:10-15 and the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10. In God's tremendous mercy, the High Priesthood of Jesus was, and is, infallible for all time “according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 4:10; 7:1-11).

The perfection as High Priest of our Lord Jesus by God the Father was foretold in the Psalms of the Old Testament, as we also see in Heb. 5:5-6. Jesus was sent by the Father to reveal the infinite love of God to Jew (Israelite) and Gentile (non-Jew) alike (Eph. 2:16-18). Even more importantly, as divine and sinless High Priest **He sacrificed Himself** (Heb. 9:14, 25-26), thereby accomplishing what could not be expected from an imperfect human priesthood! As the **Lamb of God** (John 1:29), He accomplished the perfect sacrifice in that He made “propitiation for the sins of the people.” (Heb. 2:17). See also Romans 3:25, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 (King James and New K.J. versions).

The Dake Bible (King James version) explains **propitiation** as 'the act of God whereby He becomes propitious or gracious to the sinner through Jesus Christ.' Heb. 8:6-13 points out that the new covenant is better than the former one in the *Torah* because it is based on better promises (verse 6). The Lord Jesus Himself, in heaven as **our Mediator** (9:15) is the 'guarantee' (7:22) of the present covenant! This covenant affirms that the only mediator we will ever need, and continue to need, is Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5-6; Heb. 7:24-25; 9:14-15). Our Lord announced the new covenant in His own words (Matt. 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20). The change in priesthood

went hand-in-hand with a change in covenant – a very different covenant to the one before: Heb. 8:7-13!

How does every forgiven person, reconciled with God through the blood of our High Priest, embrace the new covenant? By being drawn to Jesus by God the Father (John 1:12-13, 6:65, 14:6); by receiving God's gift of faith (Rom. 3:22; Eph. 2:8) in Jesus' unique sacrifice and continuing mediation; and by being led by God the Holy Spirit to live according to the word of God in terms of the complete New Testament. The new covenant began with Jesus' words in the gospels, but through the inspiration of **the Holy Spirit**, eventually grew (John 16:13-15) into what became known as the 'canon' of the New Testament, that is, collection of authoritative books expressing the new covenant.

The New Testament not only exalts the High Priesthood of Jesus, the Son of God, but also explains the priesthood of His faithful followers and disciples. In the apostle Peter's first letter, 1 Pet. 2:5 and verse 9, God's obedient children (1:14) are called **a holy and a royal priesthood**. Similar words are found in the old covenant where God applied them to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6 and Deuteronomy 7:6. God called His chosen people, the Israelites, a **holy and special** people in relation to all other nations on earth as long as they lived in obedience to His covenant. He said these things through Moses even before He established the Levitical priesthood through Aaron.

Spiritual Sacrifices

Peter's confirmation of the holiness of the priesthood in the New Testament is not primarily with reference to the *Torah*, but because our holiness comes through **believing in Jesus** and His act of redemption (Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12, 10:19-20). Our belief is based on our confidence in His divine anointing (Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-21) and His life and sacrifice in obedience to God our Father. To be holy means to live especially for God's purposes just like our Lord Himself. It is through our faith in him that we were adopted by God the Father : Eph. 1:2-6. 1 Peter 2:5 furthermore says that as a holy priesthood, we are to offer **spiritual sacrifices**.

The ancient sacrifices of animals and grain would not only be useless but even grieving to God in His great love and mercy to the world (John 3:16,

5:24)! **Through Jesus** and Him alone the New Testament makes clear that we now have full access to God's throne room at all times. The Mirror Bible (a paraphrase) puts it this way: “For this reason we can approach the authoritative throne of grace with bold utterance. We are **welcome there in [God's] embrace**, and are reinforced with immediate effect in times of trouble[Heb. 4:16].” “Brethren, this means that through what the blood of Jesus communicates and represents, we are now welcome to access this ultimate place of sacred encounter with unashamed confidence. A brand new way of life has been introduced. Because of [His] flesh torn on the cross, we have a High Priest in the house![Heb. 10:19-21].”

Hebrews 10:19-20 (N.I.V.) also shows that our spiritual sacrifices are to be made from our wonderful position of holiness in “the Most Holy Place”, “by a new and living way” in and through Jesus Christ. We do not exercise our priesthood other than by our confidence in Him revealed through the blessed presence of the Holy Spirit within our own spirits! A few examples of **New Testament priesthood** are: loving God above all (Deut. 6:5, Matthew 22:37-38) as well as one another (Matt. 22:39-40, John 13:34-35, 1 Corinthians 13); offering ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1-2); exercising spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 11 to 14); worship, praise and thanksgiving, and doing good (John 4:23-24; Heb. 13:15-16); desiring to be filled with a knowledge of the will of God (Col. 1:9) and prayer and supplication for fellow believers (Eph. 6:18).

Now we might ask, why does God in the New Testament command us to offer these kinds of sacrifices when Jesus has already **sacrificed Himself** as a propitiation (1 John 2:1-2, emphasis on verse 2) for our sakes and for all time, to bring about peace between God the Father and mankind? If spiritual sacrifices were required in order to seek **forgiveness** for our transgressions, that would imply that the Lord's supernatural priesthood had somehow been less than all-sufficient! And if that were not unfortunate enough, there would then sadly remain a need to carry on offering natural sacrifices, individually or otherwise, in order to hope to maintain our reconciliation or atonement with God our Father.

No. Our **remaining** imperfection and disobedience to God's word is taken care of by Jesus in terms of 1 John 2:1-2! As our Mediator, Jesus is presently our most righteous Advocate (verse 1) with God the Father as we are reassured in Heb. 7:25. The **purposes served** by our spiritual, living

sacrifices, as led by the Spirit of God, are to be strengthened in our brotherhood with Jesus (Rom. 8:29) and His holiness (Heb. 2:11-12); to bring about the transformation of our lives by the renewal of our minds, so as to “be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will”(Rom.12:2); to be witnesses to the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33, 12:28; John 3:3; Rom. 14:17) and to be ambassadors for Christ by being His ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-21) in this present world.

The glorious destiny of the priesthood

As we saw in Leviticus, holiness is to remain at the heart of our own priesthood (Heb. 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15-16; 2 Pet. 1:1-3)! Being a living sacrifice should therefore rather be described as '**living holiness**', a living union in everlasting gratitude to and identification with Jesus. This brings us to the realisation that it is God's plan for our holy priesthood to continue into eternity: Revelation 1:6, 5:10! The last book in the Bible also shows that those who reign (kings, 5:10) with the Lord and those who are said to **overcome** are the same people: Rev. 2:26-27, 20:4. Holiness also means that we are wholly renewed in spirit and in mind (Eph. 4:23-24; 2 Cor. 7:1), enabling us to overcome (conquer) evil (Rom. 12:21).

As we saw in the beginning, the priesthood came into being because of the separation between God and mankind due to what happened in the garden of Eden. However in His infinite love for mankind God immediately set about overcoming evil (Genesis 3:14-15) and **restoring relationship** between Himself and mankind! This would ultimately take place by means of the High Priesthood of Jesus in about 30 A.D. For thousands of years before that, God preserved mankind through individuals like Noah who, by **worshipping God** (priestly action), found favour with Him (Gen 6:8). Noah, Abraham and Job all built altars and, in worship, sacrificed to God for as long as hundreds of years before the Levitical priesthood.

As God told the Israelites (Exodus 19:6), He always wanted a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). “I am the Lord; I change not...” (Malachi 3:6, King James Bible). Holiness continues to characterise the child of God's **normal way of living** in relationship and intimacy with our heavenly Father. Our Father wants all of mankind to be redeemed rather than lost (Luke 19:10; John 6:39) and to accept His Son as the One who abundantly gives and preserves life (John 10:10b, 14:6) and who

intercedes for God's children. May every believer in Jesus continue in **eternal priesthood and fellowship** with Him, and reign with God now and forever.

To God be the Glory

1. To God be the glory ! Great things He has done !
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son ;
Who yielded His life for an atonement for sin,
And **opened the life-gate** that all may go in.

*Praise the Lord ! praise the Lord ! Let the earth hear His voice !
Praise the Lord ! Praise the Lord ! Let the people rejoice !
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son :
And give Him the glory ! Great things He has done !*

2. **O perfect redemption**, the purchase of blood !
To every believer the promise of God ;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

3. Great things He has taught us, great things He has done,
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son ;
But purer, and higher, and greater will be
Our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see.

Frances Jane

van Alstyne, 1820-1915

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The Priesthood in the Old and New Testaments : this is a brief study of the role of **mediation** within the context of the relationship between God and mankind. Relationship is initiated by God, not man, and therefore it is God who also makes mediation possible. Some prominent persons in mediatory or priestly positions in the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament were Abraham, Melchizedek and Aaron; in the Greek Scriptures or New Testament, the **High Priesthood of Jesus** Christ, the anointed Redeemer of all mankind (not just the Jewish nation) is on a supernatural and therefore infinitely higher level compared to the priestly role of any other human being in the Bible. The Son of God Himself became our Mediator, Saviour and Intercessor, and established a new covenant, a new foundation for the spiritual sacrifices to be offered by those prepared to follow their Saviour in becoming living sacrifices themselves.

