

A REVELATION OF..... THE 3 PRIESTHOODS

PLUS THE PRIESTHOOD TODAY

**ONE OF A SERIES OF REVELATIONS ON VARIOUS
ASPECTS OF SCRIPTURE, AS INSPIRED BY THE HOLY
SPIRIT.**

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A NOTE FROM DAVID.....

As we go through this study, my desire is that we will all grasp a little of the majesty and wonder of the plan of God to reconcile you and me back to Himself, after the fall of Adam and Eve to the wiles of satan through the serpent, in the garden of Eden.

As God is pure and we are not, He can only be approached through a mediator, a priest.

This study is about the establishment and development of the priesthood from the earliest of times until today.

I trust that we will all grasp the essence and magnificence of God's perfect plan for each one who believes back into relationship with Him.

His servant and yours

David Tait

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PART 1

THE BACKGROUND

DEFINITION OF TERMS

MELCHIZEDEK — king of righteousness, the king of Salem (q.v.). All we know of him is recorded in Gen. 14:18–20. He is subsequently mentioned only once in the Old Testament, in Ps. 110:4. The typical significance of his history is set forth in detail in the Epistle to the Hebrews, ch. 7. The apostle there points out the superiority of his priesthood to that of Aaron in these several respects, (1) Even Abraham paid him tithes; (2) he blessed Abraham; (3) he is the type of a Priest who lives for ever; (4) Levi, yet unborn, paid him tithes in the person of Abraham; (5) the permanence of his priesthood in Christ implied the abrogation of the Levitical system; (6) he was made priest not without an oath; and (7) his priesthood can neither be transmitted nor interrupted by death: “this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.”

The question as to who this mysterious personage was has given rise to a great deal of modern speculation. It is an old tradition among the Jews that he was Shem, the son of Noah, who may have survived to this time. Melchizedek was a Canaanitish prince, a worshipper of the true God, and in his peculiar history and character an instructive type of our Lord, the great High Priest (Heb. 5:6, 7; 6:20). One of the Amarna tablets is from Ebed-Tob, king of Jerusalem, the successor of Melchizedek, in which he claims the very attributes and dignity given to Melchizedek in the Epistle to the Hebrews. 1

MELCHIZEDEK (Heb. egeḏmalkîs, ‘Sedeq is (my) king’ or, as in Heb. 7:2, ‘king of righteousness’). He was the king of Salem (probably Jerusalem) and priest of ‘God Most High’ ’ēl ’elyôn) who greeted Abram on his return from the rout of *Chedorlaomer and his allies, presented him with bread and wine, blessed him in the name of God Most High and received from him a tenth part

1Easton, M. G., M. A. D. D., *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1996.

of the booty which had been taken from the enemy (Gn. 14:18ff.). Abram thereupon declined the king of Sodom's offer to let him keep all the booty apart from the recovered prisoners, swearing by God Most High that he would allow no man to have the honour of making him rich (v. 22, where *MT*, but not Samaritan, LXX, or Pesh., adds Yahweh before 'ēl 'elyôn, thus emphasizing that the two names denote one and the same God). The incident is probably to be dated in the Middle Bronze Age (*Abraham). Melchizedek's name may be compared with that of a later king of Jerusalem, Adoni-zedek (Jos. 10:1ff.).

In Ps. 110:4 a Davidic king is acclaimed by divine oath as 'a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek'. The background of this acclamation is provided by David's conquest of Jerusalem c. 1000 BC, by virtue of which David and his house became heirs to Melchizedek's dynasty of priest-kings. The king so acclaimed was identified by Jesus and his contemporaries as the Davidic Messiah (Mk. 12:35ff.). If Jesus is the Davidic Messiah, he must be the 'priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek'. This inevitable conclusion is drawn by the writer to the Hebrews, who develops his theme of our Lord's heavenly priesthood on the basis of Ps. 110:4, expounded in the light of Gn. 14:18ff., where Melchizedek appears and disappears suddenly, with nothing said about his birth or death, ancestry or descent, in a manner which declares his superiority to Abram and, by implication, to the Aaronic priesthood descended from Abram. The superiority of Christ and his new order to the levitical order of OT times is thus established (Heb. 5:6-11; 6:20-7:28).

A fragmentary text from Cave 11 at Qumran (11QMelch.) envisages Melchizedek as divinely appointed judge in the heavenly court, expounding Pss. 7:7ff.; 82:1ff. in this sense (*cf.* A. S. van der Woude, 'Melchisedech als himmlische Erlösergestalt', *OTS* 14, 1965, pp. 354ff.).

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Commentaries on Genesis, Psalms, Hebrews; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, *NIC*, 1964, pp. 94ff., 133ff.; H. H. Rowley, 'Melchizedek and Zadok', *Festschrift für A. Bertholet* (ed. W. Baumgartner *et al.*), 1950, pp. 461ff.; A. R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel*, 1955; O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, 1959, pp. 83ff.; J. A. Fitzmyer, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the NT*, 1971, pp. 221-269; F. L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, 1976; B. A. Demarest, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7:1-10 from the Reformation to the Present*, 1976. 2

PRIEST — The Heb. kohen, Gr. hierus, Lat. sacerdos, always denote one who offers sacrifices.

At first every man was his own priest, and presented his own sacrifices before God. Afterwards that office devolved on the head of the family, as in the cases of Noah (Gen. 8:20), Abraham (12:7; 13:4), Isaac (26:25), Jacob (31:54), and Job (Job 1:5).

The name first occurs as applied to Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18). Under the Levitical arrangements the office of the priesthood was limited to the tribe of Levi, and to only one family of that tribe, the family of Aaron. Certain laws respecting the qualifications of priests are given in Lev. 21:16–23. There are ordinances also regarding the priests' dress (Ex. 28:40–43) and the manner of their consecration to the office (29:1–37).

Their duties were manifold (Ex. 27:20, 21; 29:38–44; Lev. 6:12; 10:11; 24:8; Num. 10:1–10; Deut. 17:8–13; 33:10; Mal. 2:7). They represented the people before God, and offered the various sacrifices prescribed in the law.

In the time of David the priests were divided into twenty-four courses or classes (1 Chr. 24:7–18). This number was retained after the Captivity (Ezra 2:36–39; Neh. 7:39–42).

“The priests were not distributed over the country, but lived together in certain cities [forty-eight in number, of which six were cities of refuge, q.v.], which had been assigned to their use. From thence they went up by turns to minister in the temple at Jerusalem. Thus the religious instruction of the people in the country generally was left to the heads of families, until the establishment of synagogues, an event which did not take place till the return from the Captivity, and which was the main source of the freedom from idolatry that became as marked a feature of the Jewish people thenceforward as its practice had been hitherto their great national sin.”

The whole priestly system of the Jews was typical. It was a shadow of which the body is Christ. The priests all prefigured the great Priest who offered “one sacrifice for sins” “once for all” (Heb. 10:10, 12). There is now no human priesthood. (See Epistle to the Hebrews throughout.) The term “priest” is indeed applied to believers (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6), but in these cases it implies no sacerdotal functions. All true believers are now “kings and priests unto God.” As priests they have free access into the holiest of all, and offer up the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, and the sacrifices of grateful service from day to day. 1

PRIESTS AND LEVITES. The relationship between the priests, who are the descendants of Aaron, and the Levites, the other members of Levi's tribe, is one of the thorny problems of OT religion. Any treatment of the Levites must deal with the biblical evidence, Julius Wellhausen's reconstruction of it and the numerous ways in which contemporary scholars have reacted to his evolutionary approach.

I. The biblical data

a. The Pentateuch

The Levites come into prominence in the Pentateuch in connection with Moses and Aaron (Ex. 2:1-10; 4:14; 6:16-27). After Aaron led the people into apostasy with the golden calf (Ex. 32:25ff.), the sons of Levi avenged the Lord's honour by punishing many of the miscreants. This display of fidelity to God may partially account for the signal responsibilities given the tribe in the pentateuchal legislation.

The role of the Levites as ministers in the tabernacle, clearly detailed in Numbers, is anticipated in Ex. 38:21, where they co-operate in the construction of the tabernacle under the super-vision of Aaron's son, Ithamar. In the laws preparatory to the wilderness march, Levi was separated by God from the other tribes and placed in charge of the dismantling, carrying and erecting of the tabernacle (Nu. 1:47-54). The sons of Levi camped around the tabernacle and apparently served as buffers to protect their fellow-tribes from God's wrath, which threatened them if they unwittingly came in contact with the holy tent or its furnishings (Nu. 1:51, 53; 2:17).

Forbidden to serve as priests, a privilege reserved, on penalty of death, for Aaron's sons (Nu. 3:10), the Levites were dedicated to an auxiliary ministry for the priests, especially in regard to the manual labour of caring for the tabernacle (Nu. 3:5ff.). In addition, they performed an important service for the other tribes by substituting for each family's first-born, to whom God was entitled in view of the fact that he spared Israel's first-born at the Passover in Egypt (*cf.* Ex. 13:2ff., 13). As representatives of the tribes' first-born (Nu. 3:40ff.) the Levites were part of 'the far-reaching principle of *representation*' by which the concept of a people utterly dependent upon and totally surrendered to God was put across (*cf.* H. W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament*, 1953, pp. 219-221).

Each of the three families of Levi had specific duties. The sons of *Kohath* (numbering 2,750 in the age-group from 30 to 50 according to Nu. 4:36) were

in charge of carrying the furniture after it had been carefully covered by the priests, who alone could touch it (Nu. 3:29-32; 4:1ff.). The Kohathites were supervised by Aaron's son, Eleazar. The sons of *Gershon* (2,630; Nu. 4:40) cared for the coverings, screens and hangings under the supervision of Aaron's son Ithamar (Nu. 3:21-26; 4:21ff.). *Merari's* sons (3,200; Nu. 4:44) had the task of carrying and erecting the frame of the tabernacle and its court (Nu. 3:35-37; 4:29ff.)

The representative function of the Levites is symbolized in the rituals of cleansing and dedication (Nu. 8:5ff.). For instance, both the fact that the Israelites (probably through their tribal leaders) laid hands on the Levites (8:10), acknowledging them as substitutes (*cf.* Lv. 4:24, *etc.*), and the fact that the priests offered the Levites as a wave-offering (probably by leading them to and then from the altar) from the people (8:11), suggest that the Levites were given by the Israelites to serve Aaron's sons in their stead. This is made explicit in 8:16ff., where Levi's sons are called *ûnîmîⁿ*, 'gifts'.

Their service began at 25 years of age and continued until the 50th year, when the Levite went into a kind of semi-retirement with limited duties (Nu. 8:24-26). There may have been a 5-year apprenticeship, because apparently the full responsibility of carrying the tabernacle and its furnishings fell on the shoulders of the men from 30 years to 50 (Nu. 4:3ff.). When David established a permanent site for the ark, the age was lowered to 20 years because there was no longer a need for mature Levites as porters (1 Ch. 23:24ff.).

The levitical responsibility of representing the people carried with it certain privileges. Although they had no inheritance in the land (*i.e.* no portion of it was appointed for their exclusive use: Nu. 18:23-24; Dt. 12:12ff.), the Levites were supported by the tithes of the people, while the priests received the parts of the offerings not consumed by sacrifice, the firstlings of flock and herd, and a tithe of the levitical tithes (Nu. 18:8ff., 21ff.; *cf.* Dt. 18:1-4). Occasionally both priests and Levites shared in the spoils of battle (*e.g.* Nu. 31:25ff.). In addition, the Levites had permission to reside in forty-eight cities set aside for their use (Nu. 35:1ff.; Jos. 21:1ff.). Surrounding each city an area of pastureland was marked off for them. Six of the cities, three on each side of the Jordan, served as *cities of refuge.

The transition from the wilderness marches to settled life in Canaan (anticipated in Nu. 35 in the establishing of levitical cities) brought with it both an increased concern for the welfare of the Levites and an expansion of their duties in order to cope with the needs of the decentralized pattern of life. In Deuteronomy great stress is laid on the Israelites' responsibilities towards the

sons of Levi, who were to share in the rejoicing of the tribes (12:12), in their tithes and certain offerings (12:18-19; 14:28-29), and in their chief festivals, especially Weeks and Tabernacles (16:11-14). The Levites dispersed throughout the land were to share equally both the ministry and the offerings with their brethren who resided at the central shrine (18:6-8).

Whereas Numbers characteristically calls the priests the *sons of Aaron* (e.g. 10:8), Deuteronomy frequently uses the expression ‘the *Levitical priests*’ (e.g. 18:1). Though some scholars (see below) have held that no distinction is made between priest and Levite in Deuteronomy, the fact that different portions are ascribed to priests in Dt. 18:3ff. and to Levites in 18:6ff. suggests that the distinction is maintained. The phrase ‘the Levitical priests’ (e.g. Dt. 17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9; cf. Jos. 3:3; 8:33) seems to mean ‘the priests of the tribe of Levi’. To them the Deuteronomic code assigns numerous duties in addition to the care of the sanctuary: they serve as judges in cases involving difficult decisions (17:8-9), regulate the control of lepers (24:8), guard the book of the law (17:18) and assist Moses in the ceremony of covenant renewal (27:9).

Within the family of Kohath the office of high priest (Heb. hakkōhēn, ‘the priest’ [Ex. 31:10, etc.]; hakkōhēn hammāšīah, ‘the anointed priest’ [Lv. 4:3, etc.]; ʾōkkōhēn haggādha ‘the high priest’ [Lv. 21:10, etc.]) was exercised by the eldest representative of Eleazar’s family, unless the sanctions of Lv. 21:16-23 were applicable. He was consecrated in the same manner as the other priests and shared in their routine duties. He alone wore the special vestments (Ex. 28; *Breastpiece of the High Priest, *Mitre, *Dress) and interpreted the oracles (*Urim and Thummim). On the Day of *Atonement he represented the chosen people before Yahweh, sprinkling the blood of the sacrificial goat on the mercy-seat (*Sacrifice and Offering).

b. The Former Prophets

The priests play a more prominent role than the Levites in the book of Joshua, especially in the story of the crossing of Jordan and the conquest of Jericho. Sometimes called ‘the priests the Levites’ (e.g. Jos. 3:3; 8:33) and more often simply ‘the priests’ (e.g. Jos. 3:6ff.; 4:9ff.), they had the crucial task of bearing the ark of the Lord. The tabernacle, however, carried by the Levites is not mentioned (with the possible exception of 6:24) until it was pitched at Shiloh (18:1; 19:51) after the conquest of Canaan. Apparently the carrying of the ark was entrusted to the priests rather than the Kohathites (cf. Nu. 4:15) because of the supreme importance of these journeys: God, whose presence the ark symbolized, was marching forth conquering and to conquer. The Levites

came into the forefront only when the time for dividing the land was at hand (*cf.* Jos. 14:3ff.). The distinction between priests and Levites is clearly maintained: the Levites remind Eleazar, the priest, and Joshua of Moses' command concerning levitical cities (Jos. 21:1-3); the Kohathites are divided into two groups—those who have descended from Aaron (*i.e.* the priests) and the rest (Jos. 21:4-5).

The general laxness of worship during the days between the conquest of Canaan and the establishment of the Monarchy is illustrated in the two levitical stories in Judges. Micah's Levite (Jdg. 17-18) is said to hail from Bethlehem and to be a member of the family of Judah (17:7). How was he both Levite and Judahite? The answer hangs on whether the Levite is to be identified with *Jonathan, the son of Gershom (18:30). If they are identical (as seems likely), then the Levite's relationship to Judah must be geographical, not genealogical, in spite of the phrase 'family of Judah' (17:7). If the two men are not identical, then the Levite may be an example of the possibility that men of other tribes could, in this period, join themselves to the priestly tribe. This may have been the case with *Samuel, an Ephraimite (*cf.* 1 Sa. 1:1; 1 Ch. 6:28). There is some evidence that the term *Levite* may have been a functional title meaning 'one pledged by vow' as well as a tribal designation (*cf.* W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*³, 1953, pp. 109, 204ff.); however, T. J. Meek (*Hebrew Origins*³, 1960, pp. 121ff.) maintains that the Levites were originally a secular tribe who assumed a priestly function not only in Israel but perhaps in Arabia as well. The macabre story of the Levite and his concubine (Jdg. 19) is further testimony to the itinerations of the Levites and to the general laxness of the era. Lack of central authority curtailed the control which the central sanctuary at Shiloh should have enjoyed (Jdg. 18:31) and allowed numerous shrines to exist which paid little heed to the Mosaic regulations.

Levites appear only rarely in the rest of the Former Prophets, usually in connection with their role in carrying the ark (1 Sa. 6:15; 2 Sa. 15:24; 1 Ki. 8:4). When *Jeroboam I set up rival shrines at Dan and Bethel, 'staffed them with nonlevitical priests, probably in order to sever relationships with the Jerusalem Temple as completely as possible (1 Ki. 12:31; *cf.* 2 Ch. 11:13-14; 13:9-10). Royal control of the centre of worship in both kingdoms was an important feature of the Monarchy.

c. The Chronicles

The priestly perspective of the writer of the books of *Chronicles tends to accentuate the role of the Levites and fills in numerous details of their ministry

which the authors of Kings have omitted. In the genealogies of 1 Ch. 6, which also describe the role of Aaron's sons (6:49-53) and the distribution of levitical cities (6:54-81), special attention is focused on the levitical singers, Heman, Asaph, Ethan and their sons, who were put in charge of the Temple music by David (6:31ff.; cf. 1 Ch. 15:16ff.). The list of Levites in 1 Ch. 9 bristles with problems. The similarities between it and Ne. 11 have led some (e.g. ASV, RSV) to treat it as the roll of Levites who returned to Jerusalem from the captivity (cf. 1 Ch. 9:1). Others (e.g. C. F. Keil) view it as a list of early inhabitants of Jerusalem. Both the carefully organized assignments of duty and the numbers of Levites involved (cf. the 212 gatekeepers of 1 Ch. 9:22 with the 93 of 1 Ch. 26:8-11) suggest a period subsequent to that of David. The close co-operation between Levites and sons of priests (cf. 1 Ch. 9:28ff.) and the fact that Levites cared for some of the holy vessels and helped to prepare the showbread may indicate that the rigid division of duties suggested in Nu. 4 and 18 broke down during the Monarchy, perhaps because the sons of Aaron were not numerous enough (the 1,760 in 1 Ch. 9:13 probably refers to the number of kinsmen, not to the number of heads of houses) to cope with the demands of their office. Therefore, in addition to their regular tasks as singers and musicians, gatekeepers, porters, *etc.*, the Levites had to help in the actual preparation of the sacrifices, as well as in the care of the courts and chambers, the cleansing of the holy things and the preparation of the showbread, the cereal offering, the unleavened bread, the baked offering, *etc.* (23:14).

David's orders in 1 Ch. 23 illustrate the two dominant factors which produced substantial changes in the levitical offices: the permanent location of the ark in Jerusalem, which automatically made obsolete all the regulations concerning the Levites' function as porters; and the centralization of responsibility for the official religion (as for all other affairs of life) in the king. The Heb. view of corporate personality saw the king as the great father of the nation whose essential character was derived from him. As David brought the central shrine to Jerusalem (1 Ch. 13:2ff.) and established the patterns of its function (1 Ch. 15:1ff.; 23:1ff.) in accordance with the principles of the Mosaic legislation, so Solomon built, dedicated and supervised the Temple and its cult according to his father's plan (1 Ch. 28:11-13, 21; 2 Ch. 5-8, note especially 8:15: 'And they did not turn aside from what the king had commanded the priests and Levites. . .').

Similarly, Jehoshaphat commissioned princes, Levites and priests to teach the law throughout Judah (2 Ch. 17:7ff.) and appointed certain Levites, priests and family heads as judges in Jerusalem (2 Ch. 19:8ff.) under the supervision

of the chief priest. Joash (2 Ch. 24:5ff.), Hezekiah (2 Ch. 29:3ff.) and Josiah (2 Ch. 35:2ff.) supervised the priests and Levites and re-established them in their functions according to the Davidic pattern.

The relationship between the levitical office and the prophetic is a moot question. Were some Levites cult-prophets? No firm answer is possible, but there is some evidence that Levites sometimes exercised prophetic activity: Jahaziel, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, prophesied Jehoshaphat's victory over the Moabite-Ammonite coalition (2 Ch. 20:14ff.) and Jeduthun, the Levite, is called the king's *seer* (2 Ch. 35:15).

d. The Latter Prophets

Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel touch briefly upon the role of the Levites after the Exile. Is. 66:21 speaks of God's gathering of dispersed Israelites (or perhaps converted heathen) to serve him as priests and Levites. Jeremiah (33:17ff.) envisages a covenant with the levitical priests (or perhaps priests and Levites; *cf.* Syr. and Vulg.) which is as binding as God's covenant with David's family (*cf.* 2 Sa. 7). Ezekiel forces a sharp cleavage between the levitical priests, whom he calls the sons of Zadok (*e.g.* 40:46; 43:19), and the Levites. The former are deemed to have remained faithful to God (44:15; 48:11), while the latter went astray after idols and therefore could not approach the altar or handle the most sacred things (44:10-14). Actually Ezekiel's suggestion seems to be a return to the careful distinction between priest and Levite found in Numbers from the somewhat more lax view which prevailed during the Monarchy.

e. The post-exilic writings

Under Joshua and Zerubbabel 341 Levites returned (Ezr. 2:36ff.) with the 4,289 members of priestly families, and the 392 Temple servants (*înîmtⁿ*, *i.e.* 'given', 'appointed', who were apparently descendants of prisoners of war pressed into Temple service; *cf.* Jos. 9:23, 27; Ezr. 8:20). The difference between the large number of priests and the comparatively small number of Levites may be due to the fact that many Levites took on priestly status during the Exile. The other Levites responsible for menial tasks in the Temple seem to have been reluctant to return (Ezr. 8:15-20). The Levites played a prominent part at the laying of the foundation (Ezr. 3:8ff.) and at the dedication of the Temple (Ezr. 6:16ff.). Ezra, after recruiting Levites for his party (Ezr. 8:15ff.), instituted a reform to ban foreign marriages in which even priests and Levites had become involved (Ezr. 9:1ff.; 10:5ff.).

Similarly in Nehemiah, the Levites and priests engaged in their full range of duties. After repairing a section of the wall (Ne. 3:17), the Levites were busily occupied with instruction in the law (Ne. 8:7-9) and participation in the religious life of the nation (Ne. 11:3ff.; 12:27ff.). They were to receive tithes from the people and in turn to give a tithe of the tithes to Aaron's sons (Ne. 10:37ff.; 12:47). The need for a central authority to enforce the levitical regulations was shown by the deterioration of the cult during Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem: Tobiah, the Ammonite, was allowed to occupy the room in the Temple which should have served as a storeroom for the levitical tithes (Ne. 13:4ff.); deprived of their support, the Levites had forsaken the Temple and fled to their fields in order to sustain themselves (Ne. 13:10ff.).

It may have been during this period that the priests put personal gain above their covenanted responsibility to teach the law and accepted corrupt sacrifices (Mal. 1:6ff.; 2:4ff.). For Malachi, the purification of the sons of Levi was one of God's central eschatological missions (3:1-4).

The high priesthood remained in the family of Eleazar until the time of *Eli, a descendant of Ithamar. The conspiracy of *Abiathar led Solomon to depose him (1 Ki. 2:26f.). The office thus returned to the house of Eleazar in *Zadok and remained in that family until political intrigues resulted in the deposition of Onias III by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes (c. 174 BC). Thereafter it became the patronage of the ruling power.

II. Wellhausen's reconstruction

The development of the documentary hypothesis with its emphasis on the post-exilic date for the completion of the priestly code (*Pentateuch) brought with it a drastic re-evaluation of the development of Israel's religion. The classical form of this re-evaluation was stated by Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1878; E.T. 1885).

The crux of the relationship between priest and Levite for Wellhausen was Ezekiel's banning of Levites from priestly duties (44:6-16). From Ezekiel's statement Wellhausen drew two inferences: the separation of the holy from the profane was not part of the temple procedure, as the use of heathen temple servants (see above) indicates; Ezekiel reduced the Levites, who had hitherto performed priestly functions, to the status of temple-slaves. The sons of Zadok were exempt from Ezekiel's indictment because they served at the central sanctuary in Jerusalem and, unlike the Levites, had not defiled themselves by service at the high places throughout the land. When the sons of Zadok objected to relinquishing their exclusive control, Ezekiel devised 'moral'

grounds for maintaining their exclusiveness, although actually the distinction between priests and Levites was accidental not moral (the priests *happened* to be at Jerusalem, the Levites at the high places). Wellhausen concluded that the priestly law of Numbers did not exist in Ezekiel's time.

Since the Aaronic priesthood is stressed only in the priestly code, it was viewed by Wellhausen as a fiction in order to give the priesthood an anchor in the Mosaic period. The genealogies in Chronicles are artificial attempts to link the sons of Zadok with Aaron and Eleazar.

Central in Wellhausen's reconstruction was the striking contrast between the 'elaborate machinery' of the wilderness cult and the decentralization of the period of the Judges, when worship played apparently only a minor role according to Jdg. 3-16. The latter period he took to be the authentic time of origin of Israelite worship, which began simply as various family heads offered their own sacrifices, and developed as certain families (*e.g.* Eli's at Shiloh) gained prominence at special sanctuaries. A startling example of the contrast between the complexity of the wilderness religion and the simplicity during the settlement was the fact that Samuel, an Ephraimite, slept nightly beside the ark (1 Sa. 3:3) in the place where, according to Lv. 16, only the high priest could enter annually.

When Solomon built the permanent shrine for the ark, the prominence of the Jerusalem priests (under Zadok, whom David had appointed) was assured. Like Judah, like Israel: Jeroboam's shrines were royal shrines and the priests were directly responsible to him (Am. 7:10ff.). In Judah the process of centralization reached its acme when Josiah's reform abolished the high places, reduced their priests to subsidiary status in the central sanctuary and set the stage for Ezekiel's crucial declaration.

Against this evolutionary schematization, Wellhausen set the various strata of the Pentateuch and found a remarkable degree of correspondence. In the laws of J (Ex. 20-23; 34) the priesthood is not mentioned, while the other parts of J mark Aaron (Ex. 4:14; 32:1ff.) and Moses (Ex. 33:7-11) as founders of the clergy. The mention of other priests (*e.g.* Ex. 19:22; 32:29) was disregarded by Wellhausen, who considered these passages as interpolations. It was in D (Dt. 16:18-18:22) that he saw the beginning of the use of the name *Levites* for the priests. The hereditary character of the priesthood began not with Aaron (who, according to Wellhausen, 'was not originally present in J, but owed his introduction to the redactor who combined J and E') but during the Monarchy with the sons of Zadok. Recognizing the basic authenticity of the inclusion of Levi in the tribal blessings of Gn. 49, Wellhausen believed that this tribe

‘succumbed at an early date’ and that the supposed tie between the official use of the term *Levite* and the tribe of Levi was artificial.

The priestly code (P) not only strengthened the hand of the clergy but introduced the basic division into the ranks of the clergy—the separation of priests (Aaron’s sons) from Levites (the rest of the tribe). Therefore, while the Deuteronomist spoke of levitical priests (*i.e.* the priests the Levites) the priestly writers, especially the Chronicler, spoke of priests and Levites.

Another priestly innovation was the figure of the high priest, who loomed larger in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers than anywhere else in the pre-exilic writings. Whereas in the historical books the king dominated the cult, in the priestly code it was the high priest, whose regal status, according to Wellhausen, could only reflect a period when the civil government of Judah was in the hands of foreigners and Israel was not so much a people as a church—the post-exilic period.

One need only consult such representative works as Max Loehr’s *A History of Religion in the Old Testament*, 1936, *e.g.* pp. 136-137; W. O. E. Oesterley and T. H. Robinson’s *Hebrew Religion*, 1930, *e.g.* p. 255; and R. H. Pfeiffer’s *IOT*, 1948, *e.g.* pp. 556-557, to see the stubbornness with which Wellhausen’s reconstruction has persisted.

III. Some reactions to Wellhausen’s reconstruction

Among the conservatives who have set out to tumble Wellhausen’s structure, three names are noteworthy: James Orr (*The Problem of the Old Testament*, 1906), O. T. Allis (*The Five Books of Moses*², 1949, pp. 185-196), G. Ch. Aalders (*A Short Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 1949, pp. 66-71).

Basic to Wellhausen’s reconstruction is the assumption that the Levites who were invited in Dt. 18:6-7 to serve at the central shrine were the priests who had been disfranchised by the abolition of their high places during Josiah’s reform. But solid evidence for this assumption is lacking. In fact, 2 Ki. 23:9 affirms the opposite: the priests of the high places did not come up to the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem. The critical view that priests and Levites are not clearly distinguished in Deuteronomy has been discussed above, where it was seen that a clear distinction was made between them in regard to the people’s responsibility towards them (Dt. 18:3-5, 6-8). Nor can the view that the phrase ‘the priests the Levites’ (Dt. 17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9), not found elsewhere in the Pentateuch, argues for the identity of the two offices in Deuteronomy be maintained. The phrase serves merely to link the priests with their tribe. Confirmation for this seems to be found in 2 Ch. 23:18 and 30:27, where the

‘Levitical priests’ are distinguished from other Levites (30:25), gatekeepers, *etc.* (23:19).

Attention has frequently been directed by Wellhausen and others to the apparent discrepancy between the law of *tithes in Nu. 18:21ff. (*cf.* Lv. 27:30ff.), which earmarks the tithes for the Levites, and the counterpart in Dt. 14:22ff., which allows Israelites to eat of the tithes in a sacrificial meal while enjoining them to share it with the Levites. Judaism has traditionally reconciled these passages by calling the tithe of Deuteronomy ‘a second tithe’, *e.g.* in the Talmudic tractate .Ma’ašer Šeni This explanation may not be so acceptable as James Orr’s (*op.cit.*, pp. 188-189): the laws of Deuteronomy, he held, apply to a time when the tithe-laws (and those relating to levitical cities) could not be fully enforced, since the conquest was not complete and there was no central agency to enforce them. In other words, Nu. 18:21ff. deals with Israel’s ideal while Dt. 14:22ff., is an interim programme for the conquest and settlement.

Pivotal in Wellhausen’s reconstruction is his interpretation of Ezekiel’s denunciation of the Levites (44:4ff.), in which he finds the origin of the cleavage between priests (the sons of Zadok) and Levites (priests who had previously engaged in idolatry at the high places). But James Orr (*op.cit.*, pp. 315-319, 520) calls attention to the deplorable condition of the priesthood just prior to Ezekiel’s time and points out that Ezekiel did not establish the law but rather re-established it by depriving Levites of privileges not rightly theirs, which they had usurped during the Monarchy and by demoting idolatrous priests to the already well established lower rank of Levite. Furthermore, the ideal context of Ezekiel’s pronouncement suggests that the degradation in view may never have been carried out, at least not literally. The tone of Ezekiel stands in contradiction to that of the priestly code in that the latter knows nothing of priestly degradation but stresses divine appointment. In addition, the priests in P are not Zadok’s sons but Aaron’s sons.

The office of high priest has been largely relegated to the post-exilic period by the Wellhausenian school. Though the title itself occurs only in 2 Ki. 12:10; 22:4, 8; 23:4 in pre-exilic writings (usually considered by documentary critics to be post-exilic interpolations), the existence of the office seems to be indicated by the title ‘*the priest*’ (*e.g.* Ahimelech, 1 Sa. 21:2; Jehoiada, 2 Ki. 11:9-10, 15; Urijah, 2 Ki. 16:10ff.) and by the fact that a priesthood of any size at all involves an administrative chief, even if the king is the head of the cult. (*Cf.* J. Pedersen, *Israel*, 3-4, p. 189.)

In *The Religion of Israel*, 1960, Yehezkel Kaufmann examines a number of Wellhausen’s key conclusions and finds them wanting. The high priests, for

instance, far from being a royal figure reflecting the post-exilic religious leaders, faithfully mirrors the conditions of the military camp which is subject to the authority of Moses, not Aaron (*op.cit.*, pp. 184-187).

Kaufmann turns his attention to ‘the one pillar of Wellhausen’s structure that has not been shaken by later criticism’—the reconstruction of the relationship between priests and Levites. Noting the absence of evidence for the demotion of the rural priests, he then calls attention to a basic weakness in the documentary view: ‘Nothing can make plausible a theory that the very priests who demoted their colleagues saw fit to endow them with the amplest clerical due, a theory the more improbable when the great number of priests and paucity of Levites at the Restoration (4,289 priests, Ezr. 2:36ff.; 341 Levites plus 392 temple servants, Ezr. 2:43ff.) is borne in mind’ (p. 194).

Why did the priests preserve the story of the Levites’ faithfulness during Aaron’s defection (Ex. 32:26-29), while glossing over the idolatry, which, for Wellhausen, was responsible for their degradation, and according the Levites the honour of divine appointment rather than punishment? After affirming that the Levites are clearly a distinct class in the Exile, Kaufmann points out that they could not have developed as a distinct class in the brief period between Josiah’s reform (to say nothing of Ezekiel’s denunciation) and the return, and that on foreign soil.

Kaufmann’s own reconstruction may not prove entirely satisfactory. He denies a hereditary connection between the sons of Aaron and the Levites, since he deems the Aaronids to be ‘the ancient, pagan priesthood of Israel’ (p. 197), and thus rejects the firm biblical tradition connecting Moses, Aaron and the Levites (*cf.* Ex. 4:14). In the golden calf incident the old secular tribe of Levi rallied with Moses against Aaron, but was forced to yield the privilege of altar service to the Aaronids (p. 198), while they themselves had to be content as *hierodules*. This raises the question as to how, apart from a connection with Moses, the Aaronids survived the catastrophe of the golden calf and continued as priests. Kaufmann’s opinion that the Deuteronomic legislation was compiled during the latter part of the Monarchy and thus is considerably later than the priestly writings may be more of a return to an old critical position (*i.e.* that of Th. Noeldeke and others) than a fresh thrust at Wellhausen.

Rejecting the linear view of institutional evolution which was a main plank in Wellhausen’s platform, W. F. Albright notes that Israel would be unique among her neighbours had she not enjoyed during the period of the Judges and afterwards a high priest, usually called (in accordance with Semitic practice) *the priest* (*Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*³, 1953, pp. 107-108). The

lack of emphasis on the high-priestly office during the Monarchy represents a decline, while, after the Monarchy's collapse, the priesthood again rose to a position of prestige. Albright accepts the historicity of Aaron and finds no reason for not considering Zadok an Aaronid. Concluding that the Levite had first a functional (see above) and then a tribal significance, Albright points out that Levites may sometimes have been promoted to priests and that 'we are not justified either in throwing overboard the standard Israelite tradition regarding priests and Levites, or in considering these classes as hard and fast genealogical groups' (*op.cit.*, p. 110).

The assumption that the tabernacle in the wilderness was the idealization of the Temple and had no historical existence, so basic to Wellhausen's reconstruction, has now largely been abandoned (although *cf.* R. H. Pfeiffer's *Religion in the Old Testament*, 1961, pp. 77-78). Both arks and portable tent-shrines are attested among Israel's neighbours, as archaeology has revealed. Far from being figments of a later period, these, as John Bright notes, are 'heritages of Israel's primitive desert faith' (*A History of Israel*, 1960, pp. 146-147).

Obviously the last word has not been said on this puzzling problem of the relationship between priests and Levites. The data from the period of the conquest and settlement are meagre. It is hazardous to assume that the pentateuchal legislation, representing the ideal as it often does, was ever carried out literally. Even such stalwart kings as David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah were not able to ensure complete conformity to the Mosaic pattern. But it is even more tenuous to hold that because laws were not enforced they did not exist. The combination of argumentation from silence, straight-line evolutionary reconstruction, and a resort to textual emendations and literary excisions when passages prove troublesome, has resulted more than once in interpretations of biblical history which have proved to be too facile to stand permanently in the face of the complexities of biblical data and Semitic culture. Wellhausen's ingenious reconstruction of the history of the Levites may prove to be a case in point.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. In addition to works cited above, R. Brinker, *The Influence of Sanctuaries in Early Israel*, 1946, pp. 65ff.; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, E.T. 1961; A. Cody, *A History of the Old Testament Priesthood*, 1969; M. Haran *et al.*, 'Priests and Priesthood', *EJ*, 13, 1970; H.-J. Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, E.T. 1966.

IV. Priesthood in the New Testament

a. Continuity with the Old Testament

With the single exception of the priest of Zeus, who wrongly seeks to venerate Paul and Barnabas in Lystra (Acts 14:13), references to priest and high priest in the Gospels and Acts assume an historical and religious continuity with the OT: no explanation is needed of the priest's function in the story of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:31) or of the duties of the 'priest named Zechariah', father of John the Baptist (Lk. 1:5); Jesus recognized the lawful function of the priests in declaring lepers clean (Mt. 8:4; Mk. 1:44; Lk. 5:14; 17:14; see Lv. 14:3). Jesus also pitted the freer practice of some OT priests against the legalism of his opponents (Mt. 12:4-5). He had no basic quarrel with the prescribed functions of the Temple and priesthood.

b. Conflict with Judaism

The lion's share of references to priests, especially high priests (or chief priests as RSV usually has them) are found, however, in contexts of conflict. Matthew depicts the high priests as actively involved in the gospel events from beginning (Mt. 2:4) to end (Mt. 28:11). Their opposition mounts as the claims and mission of Jesus become clear, *e.g.* in his challenge to the Sabbath legislation (Mt. 12:1-7; Mk. 2:23-27; Lk. 6:1-5) and in his parables that censured the religious leaders (Mt. 21:45-46). This conflict to the death was anticipated immediately after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:21; Mk. 8:31; Lk. 9:22), was intensified at the Palm Sunday reception and the subsequent Temple cleansing (Mt. 21:15, 23, 45-46; Mk. 11:27; Lk. 19:47-48; 20:1), and reached its bitter climax in the arrest and trial (Mt. 26-27). The Fourth Gospel also bears witness to the conflict (Jn. 7:32, 45; 11:47, where Pharisees are the partners in crime; 12:10, where the hostility focuses on Lazarus; 18:19, 22, 24, 35, where Caiaphas' role in Jesus' trial is stressed; *cf.* 19:15).

The chief priests (*archiereus*) rarely acted alone in their desire to crush Jesus' influence. Depending on the issue and circumstances, they were joined by other officials of the Sanhedrin (*archontes*, Lk. 23:13; 24:20), by scribes (*mmateisgra*, Mt. 2:4; 20:18; 21:15), by scribes and elders (*,grammateis presbyteroi*, Mt. 16:21; 27:41; Mk. 8:31; 11:27; 14:43, 53; Lk. 9:22), by elders (Mt. 21:23; 26:3). The singular 'high priest' usually refers to the president of the Sanhedrin (*e.g.* Caiaphas, Mt. 26:57; Jn. 18:13; Annas, Lk. 3:2; Jn. 18:24; Acts 4:6; Ananias, Acts 23:2; 24:1). The plural 'chief priests' describes members of the high-priestly families who serve in the Sanhedrin; ruling and former high priests together with members of the prominent priestly families (Acts 4:6). J. Jeremias has argued that 'chief priests' include Temple officers

like treasurer and captain of police (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, E.T. 1969, pp. 160ff.).

The death and resurrection of Jesus did not quell the conflict, as Acts amply documents. The apostolic witness to the resurrection drew the Sadducees into the struggle alongside the chief priests and other Temple officials (Acts 4:1; 5:17). Priestly involvement in the story of Saul of Tarsus is noteworthy. The proposed persecution of Christians in Damascus apparently had the official sanction of the high priest (Acts 9:1-2, 14); the 'itinerant Jewish exorcists' who sought to duplicate Paul's miracles in Ephesus were described as 'seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva' (Acts 19:13-14); like his Master, Paul stood trial before a high priest, Ananias, who also pressed charges against him before the Roman governors Felix and Festus (Acts 24:1ff.; 25:1-3). Almost nothing in the apostle's life illustrates so clearly the radical change wrought by his conversion than the dramatic reversal in his relationships to the priestly establishment: the beginning of his story found him riding with the hounds; the end, running with the foxes.

c. Consummation in Christ

At root this conflict sprang from the Christian conviction and the Jewish suspicion that Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension spelt the eclipse if not the destruction of the old priestly structures. Jesus' own teaching had placed him at the heart of a new sacerdotal structure: 'something greater than the temple is here' (Mt. 12:6); 'destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (Jn. 2:19); 'for the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk. 10:45).

Of the NT writers, it is the author of Hebrews who picks up these threads and weaves them into a many-coloured fabric. In its passion to prove that the Christian faith is superior to, indeed has replaced, the OT patterns of worship, Hebrews presses persistently its claim that Jesus has been appointed by God (5:5-10) to be the new, the true high priest who can finally deal with human sin. His priesthood, surpassing Aaron's (7:11) and reaching back to Melchizedek's (7:15-17), contains the perfection missing in the older sacrificial system (7:18): 1. It is based on God's own oath (7:20-22); 2. It is permanent because it is centred in the eternal Christ (7:23-25); 3. It partakes of the perfection of Christ who had no need to be purged of sin, as did the sons of Aaron (7:26-28); 4. It continues in the heavens where God himself has erected the true sanctuary of which Moses' tent was but 'a copy and shadow' (8:1-7); 5. It is the fulfilment of God's promise of a new covenant (8:8-13); 6. Its sacrifice needs no repeating

but was rendered ‘once for all’ (7:27; 9:12); 7. Its offering was not ‘the blood of bulls and goats’, unable to take away sins, but ‘the body of Jesus Christ’, through which believers are sanctified (10:4, 10); 8. Its result is full and regular access to God for all Christians not just a priestly order (10:11-22); 9. Its promises and hopes are assured by the faithfulness of God and the assurance of Christ’s second coming (9:28; 10:23); 10. Its full forgiveness provides the highest motivation for our works of love and righteousness (10:19-25); 11. Its effectiveness in the lives of God’s people is guaranteed by Christ’s constant intercession (7:25). Though Paul did not choose to make Christ’s priesthood a dominant theme in his writings (probably because his ministry was largely to Gentiles, for whom a knowledge of their freedom from law and their new place in God’s purpose was the pre-eminent need), we can be grateful that the rich insights of Hebrews are among God’s gifts in the canon of Scripture. See G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 1974, pp. 578-584.

d. Commission of the church

As Christ’s body and as his new Israel (*cf.* Ex. 19:6), the church is anointed to a priesthood in the world—a mediatorial service that declares the will of God to humankind and bears human needs before God’s throne in prayer. Two related duties of this priesthood are mentioned by Peter: 1. ‘to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1 Pet. 2:5), *i.e.* to worship God and do his loving will; 2. to ‘declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’, *i.e.* to bear witness to his saving work in the world (1 Pet. 2:9).

Peter’s ‘royal priesthood’ is echoed and amplified in Rev. where the beloved and forgiven church is called ‘a kingdom, priests to his God and Father’ (Rev. 1:6; *cf.* 5:10; 20:6). This royal role not only entails obedience to Christ ‘the ruler of kings on earth’ (Rev. 1:5) but also participation in his rule over others: ‘and they shall reign on earth’ (Rev. 5:10; *cf.* 20:6). Here the circle of conflict has taken a full turn: the people of Christ, afflicted by a priesthood that opposed their Master, will share in his victory as triumphant high priest and demonstrate his loving sovereignty in a hostile world.

The church’s priesthood in the NT is corporate: no individual minister or leader is called ‘priest’. The post-apostolic writings, however, move quickly in that direction: Clement (AD 95-96) describes Christian ministry in terms of high priest, priests and Levites (*1 Clem.* 40-44); the *Didache* (13:3) likens prophets to high priests. Tertullian (*On Baptism* 17) and Hippolytus (*Refutation of All*

Heresies, preface) seemed to have pioneered the use of the titles ‘priest’ and ‘high priest’ for Christian ministers (c. AD 200). 2

PART 2

REVELATION OF.....THE 3

PRIESTHOODS

THE PRIESTHOOD OF MELCHIZEDEK

INTRODUCTION

Melchizedek reigned, as king/priest, in (Jeru)Salem

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. (Hebrews 7:1a)

during the time of Abraham, 3,000+ years ago.

Abraham was born in Ur, in modern day Iraq, which many regard as being the oldest city in the world. More like a settlement in modern terms. Basically though, the family were nomads. Eventually, Abraham travelled to Canaan, at the Lord's command.

3 So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. (Genesis 12:4-5)

He lived there for approximately 100 years.

Altogether, Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. (Genesis 25:7)

Salem was in Canaan.

While living there, his nephew Lot was captured by some local raiders. Abraham took his 318 trained fighting men and recaptured Lot and his family.

It was at this point that he met with Melchizedek.

WHO WAS MELCHIZEDEK?

The identity of Melchizedek is shrouded in mystery. Was he human? Was he divine?

There are arguments both ways, none of which we are going to get involved in here.

Jewish tradition identifies him as Shem, the son of Noah, who could possibly still have been living at the time. However, this verse in Hebrews would appear to contradict this tradition.

4 Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever. (Hebrews 7:3)

What is of importance though, is that he did not die in a conventional sense, for his ministry was a continuing one, right through the ages.

For the purposes of this study, his ongoing priesthood is the key factor in our understanding of his life and ministry.

THE MEETING WITH ABRAHAM

There was a battle between 2 groups of local ‘kings’, four against five.

⁸ Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) marched out and drew up their battle lines in the Valley of Siddim ⁹ against Kedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar and Arioch king of Ellasar—four kings against five. (Genesis 14:8-9)

The group including the Kings of Sodom (where Lot, Abraham’s nephew, and his family were living) and Gomorrah, were defeated and the family captured, along with others, and all their possessions.

Abraham set out on a rescue mission. By employing clever tactics Abraham and his 318 men rescued all those who had been captured.

¹⁵ During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. ¹⁶ He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people. (Genesis 14:15-16)

A very grateful King of Sodom came out to meet Abraham at the Valley of Shaveh, which is just north of Jerusalem.

¹⁷ After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). (Genesis 14:17)

At that time, Melchizedek came out from (Jeru)Salem and blessed Abraham with bread and wine, so establishing what was to become the ongoing symbol of priesthood.

¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. ²⁰ And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." (Genesis 14:18-20a)

In return for the blessing Abraham gave a tithe of 10% of his own possessions that he had recovered during the battle and those of the others that he had also recaptured.

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Genesis 14:20b)

The remaining possessions belonging to others were returned, in spite of protestations. For Abraham did not want his future to be associated with theirs. Which was really good sense, as it turned out later, in the case of the King of Sodom!

²¹ The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself." ²² But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have raised my hand

to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath ²³ that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.' ²⁴ I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me—to Aner, Eshcol and Mamre. Let them have their share.” (Genesis 14:21-4)

THE ROLE OF MELCHIZEDEK

Melchizedek had a dual role in life, being that of a ‘king’ combined with that of a ‘priest’.

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. (Hebrews 7:1a)

The common religion of the time was the worship of a multiplicity of Gods, so both Melchizedek and Abraham were unusual in their era.

Additionally, society was primarily organized on the basis of extended families, most of whom were nomadic. Townships were very small, and most likely, family based.

This makes both the person and the role of Melchizedek most unusual, for he had no family tree. Therefore he would not have been aligned to a particular family group, such as Abraham’s.

Who lived in Salem, we do not know. Whoever they were, and it would have only been a very small number, Melchizedek had temporal, kingly authority over them. Whether these people followed the one true God, we also do not know.

However, Abraham did. And so Melchizedek was able to bless Abraham in his position as the priest of the Most High God.

A priest always has two functions – to bless and to sacrifice.

³ *Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices (Hebrews 8:3a)*

We don't know what the sacrificial role of Melchizedek was. If we did, it would resolve once and for all the argument over whether he was God or man. However God, in His wisdom, has not chosen to reveal that to us.

Melchizedek blessed Abraham with a literal meal including bread and wine, for he and his men were hungry after the battle they had been in, giving thanks to God for their victory.

¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. ²⁰ And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." (Genesis 14:18-20)

As we will see as we continue this study, bread and wine are symbols of the priesthood and therefore, in a spiritual sense, can only be dispensed by priests.

GAPS IN THE BIBLE

To get a true understanding of the developing revelation of God in the Bible it is necessary to understand that the Old Testament, rather than being a group of books covering a single time period, is really split into two, with a break of 400 years between them, of which there is no record. There is also a similar break of 400 years of unrecorded history between the Old Testament and the New.

Therefore, the Bible is split into three:

1. Genesis,
2. Exodus to Malachi and
3. Matthew to Revelation.

This means that there is to be an individual priesthood that applies to each of the three.

MELCHIZEDEK - PRIEST TO A FAMILY

Abraham was chosen by God to reestablish His godly line upon the earth. God made a covenant (today a contract) with Abraham, promising him, who had no children that he would be the father of a godly line, which continues spiritually, through to believers today.

God's Covenant With Abram

15 *After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”² But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.”⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15 :1-6)*

The godly line would only pass down through one member of the next generation, through Isaac and Jacob, thus continuing to limit the godly blessing to a specific family.

Presumably the reason for this is found in the nomadic nature of the people of the time. As the sons grew up, they would get married, leave their parents and form their own nomadic group, or family. The godly line remained restricted to a family until Jacob and his sons went to Egypt, where effectively, the Jewish nation was born.

We do not know how long Melchizedek was around, or even whether he met Abraham again, let alone Isaac or Jacob. But the family based principle of the Melchizedek priesthood was established through what is recorded in Genesis.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD

Most of what we know about Melchizedek is contained in the New Testament book of Hebrews. The writer would have known of Melchizedek through Jewish tradition, handed down from generation to generation, but must also have had a revelation from God about the special role he played.

1. MEANING OF HIS NAME:

First, his name means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” (Hebrews 7:2b)

In these times, your name reflected your character and role in life.

2. AN ONGOING PRIESTHOOD:

Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever. (Hebrews 7:3)

Without entering into arguments about his immortality, the key revelation here is that, like Jesus, his ministry is eternal. While we cannot fully understand this, the key point is the ministry of Melchizedek remains, even to today.

3. GREATER THAN ABRAHAM, FATHER OF THE LEVITICAL PRIESTHOOD:

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! (Hebrews 7:4)

By implication, the priesthood of Melchizedek was greater than the Levitical one. This is then confirmed, when it is said that the Levitical priesthood effectively tithed to Melchizedek.

⁹ *One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham,* ¹⁰ *because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor. (Hebrews 7:9-10)*

4. OF THE SAME ORDER AS JESUS:

¹⁷ *For it is declared: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 7:17)*

Wow! Amazing! Beyond our comprehension!

5. OF SIMILAR CHARACTER TO JESUS:

²⁶ *Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. (Hebrews 7:26)*

Being of the same order implies a similar character. Hence why Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, who in spite of his admirable attributes, had his share of human failings also.

6. PERFECTION NECESSARY TO ENTER THE MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD:

⁷ During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:7-10)

Jesus is the only other one who has reached the mark of proven perfection to become a member of the Melchizedek priesthood.

CONCLUSION

The priesthood of Melchizedek was perfect for the times, as you would expect with God.

Melchizedek ministered on a personal basis to the family, as represented by Abraham. The basis of family is relationship. In most circumstances, there are not formal rules, and behaviour is regulated by internal family dynamics.

In any event, these patriarchal families did not have a written language to write them down. All knowledge was handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation.

We had a perfect king/priest ministering to imperfect people.

A GAP OF 400 YEARS

Between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus there is a 400 year gap of unrecorded history.

Of course this does not mean that nothing was happening! Over the 400 years of living in Egypt the family multiplied and became a nation. The Egyptians taught them agriculture and crop production, which was necessary to a settled, as opposed to a nomadic lifestyle. The Egyptians also gave the Jews a written language and taught the governance skills necessary for a settled society to maintain itself.

In people terms, we move from Joseph to Moses. Over this time the Jews lived in the same physical location growing the formerly nomadic families into a settled nation of many, many people, perhaps 2.5 million. They had become a vital cog in Egyptian society, hence why the Pharaoh was so reluctant to let them leave!

THE PRIESTHOOD OF AARON

With the growth into a nation, a new type of priesthood was required. Gone were the simple family relationships. Now the priesthood had to minister to millions of people.

As a written language had been acquired from the Egyptians, information that had formally had to be passed down orally from generation to generation could now be recorded in written form. Hence the capacity now existed for the people to record large amounts of information.

THE LAW

In the perfect timing of God the situation now existed for a new priesthood, one based on recorded law that could be available and understood by a large number of people. Of course, because it was in written form, God could lay out in much greater detail the way in which He desired His people to live.

I am advised that “according to the Talmud there are 613 mitzvot (“commandments”) in the Torah. There are 248 positive mitzvot and 365 negative mitzvot given supplemented by seven mitzvot legislated by the rabbis of antiquity.”

Obviously, these would not have been possible to memorise – with my memory anyway!

The Old Testament law was given to Moses on Mt Sinai by God himself, after the people had escaped from Egypt.

⁹ The LORD said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.” Then Moses told the LORD what the people had said. (Exodus 19:9)

The Law comprehensively covered all aspects of daily living as well as setting out the way in which God desired to relate to His people. God explained this to Moses.

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:3-6)

The people agreed (temporarily as it turned out!) to abide by the Law.

⁷ So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. ⁸ The people all responded together, “We will do everything the LORD has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD. (Exodus 19:7-8)

Moses was given the universal laws of the Ten Commandments and rules for daily living, including instruction about Idols and Altars, Hebrew Servants, Personal Injuries, Protection of Property, Social Responsibility, Laws of Justice and Mercy, Sabbath Laws and instructions for The Three Annual Festivals and the construction of the Tabernacle.

THE SEPARATION OF KINGS AND PRIESTS

One important feature of the creation of the Jewish nation was the separation of the temporal ‘kingly’ functions from the spiritual, ‘priestly’ ones.

However, in spite of this separation, there was a much closer relationship between the two than, for instance, we would see today.

Of course, this relationship depended, to a large extent, upon the attitude of the king towards God. The story of the Jewish nation is recorded in Kings and each succeeding king is first described by his attitude towards God, as that set the pattern for his reign. There were godly kings such as Hezekiah

In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Hezekiah son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign. ² He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother’s name was

Abijah daughter of Zechariah. ³ He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. (2 Kings 18:1-3)

to go along with the ungodly, such as Hezekiah's son, Manasseh.

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. His mother's name was Hephzibah. ² He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. (2 Kings 21:1-2)

The ups and downs of the history of people of Israel were largely determined by the attitude of their individual kings to God.

THE ROLE OF THE PRIESTHOOD

The Biblical definition of a priest is:

"A chosen officer or prince with the capacity to draw near to God and minister. He alone is responsible for offering the divinely appointed sacrifices to God, for executing the different procedures and ceremonies relating to the worship of God, and for being a representative between God and man." (http://www.bible-history.com/tabernacle/TAB4The_Priests.htm)

A priest is an intermediary between man and God offering God's blessings in return for sacrifice for man's sin.

Sacrifice of a life for a life, is a basic principle of God. Why? We don't really understand but it doesn't alter the fact that all sin requires a blood sacrifice;

¹¹ For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. (Leviticus 17:11)

While we don't know the form of the sacrifice that Melchizedek offered to God, there would have been one. With the Aaronic priesthood however, the sacrifices were very clearly set out in the instructions Moses received from God. For example;

The Burnt Offering

⁸ *The LORD said to Moses:* ⁹ *“Give Aaron and his sons this command: ‘These are the regulations for the burnt offering: The burnt offering is to remain on the altar hearth throughout the night, till morning, and the fire must be kept burning on the altar. ¹⁰ The priest shall then put on his linen clothes, with linen undergarments next to his body, and shall remove the ashes of the burnt offering that the fire has consumed on the altar and place them beside the altar. ¹¹ Then he is to take off these clothes and put on others, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a place that is ceremonially clean. ¹² The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out. Every morning the priest is to add firewood and arrange the burnt offering on the fire and burn the fat of the fellowship offerings on it. ¹³ The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out. (Leviticus 6:8-13)*

These instructions were often given in great detail;

¹⁴ *He then presented the bull for the sin offering, and Aaron and his sons laid their hands on its head. ¹⁵ Moses slaughtered the bull and took some of the blood, and with his finger he put it on all the horns of the altar to purify the altar. He poured out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. So he consecrated it to make atonement for it. ¹⁶ Moses also took all the fat around the inner parts, the covering of the liver, and both kidneys and their fat, and burned it on the altar. ¹⁷ But the bull with its hide and its flesh and its offal he burned up outside the camp, as the LORD commanded Moses. (Leviticus 8:14-17)*

Accompanying the sacrifices, as a sign of sin forgiven, was the blessing;

The Priestly Blessing

²² *The LORD said to Moses,* ²³ *“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: ²⁴ “‘The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. ”’ ²⁷ “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” (Numbers 26:22-7)*

WHO WERE THE PRIESTS?

Responsibility for the priesthood was allocated by God to the tribe of Levi. Within the tribe, only the family line of Aaron was actually able to be priests while the remainder of the tribe supported them in their priestly functions.

THE LINE OF AARON

The priesthood was to follow down the line of Aaron.

¹² *“Bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and wash them with water. ¹³ Then dress Aaron in the sacred garments, anoint him and consecrate him so he may serve me as priest. ¹⁴ Bring his sons and dress them in tunics. ¹⁵ Anoint them just as you anointed their father, so they may serve me as priests. Their anointing will be to a priesthood that will continue for all generations to come.” ¹⁶ Moses did everything just as the LORD commanded him. (Exodus 38:10-16)*

The priests were required to live a lifestyle of purity. They were not to defile themselves by contact with the dead, unless it was their close relatives.

The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: ‘A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die, ² except for a close relative, such as his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother, ³ or an unmarried sister who is dependent on him since she has no husband—for her he may make himself unclean. ⁴ He must not make himself unclean for people related to him by marriage, and so defile himself. (Leviticus 21:1-4)

They were required to be holy.

⁵ *“Priests must not shave their heads or shave off the edges of their beards or cut their bodies. ⁶ They must be holy to their God and must not profane the name of their God. Because they present the offerings made to the LORD by fire, the food of their God, they are to be holy. (Leviticus 21:5-6)*

They were expected to have the highest moral standards.

⁷ *“They must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorced from their husbands, because priests are holy to their God. ⁸ Regard them as holy, because they offer up the food of your God. Consider them holy, because I the*

LORD am holy—I who make you holy. ⁹ “If a priest’s daughter defiles herself by becoming a prostitute, she disgraces her father; she must be burned in the fire. (Leviticus 21:7-9)

The High Priest had to live by even higher standards.

¹⁰ “The high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments, must not let his hair become unkempt or tear his clothes. ¹¹ He must not enter a place where there is a dead body. He must not make himself unclean, even for his father or mother, ¹² nor leave the sanctuary of his God or desecrate it, because he has been dedicated by the anointing oil of his God. I am the LORD. ¹³ “The woman he marries must be a virgin. ¹⁴ He must not marry a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman defiled by prostitution, but only a virgin from his own people, ¹⁵ so he will not defile his offspring among his people. I am the LORD, who makes him holy.” (Leviticus 21:10-15)

Unreasonable as it may appear to us today, like all the sacrifices offered the priest had to be physically perfect too, as the Aaronic Priesthood was based in the natural rather than the spiritual.

¹⁶ The LORD said to Moses, ¹⁷ “Say to Aaron: ‘For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. ¹⁸ No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; ¹⁹ no man with a crippled foot or hand, ²⁰ or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. ²¹ No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the offerings made to the LORD by fire. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God. ²² He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food; ²³ yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the LORD, who makes them holy.” (Leviticus 21:15-23)

CONSECRATION OF THE PRIESTS – ANIMAL SACRIFICES PLUS OFFERINGS OF BREAD AND WINE

The ritual to consecrate a priest took place over a 7 day period (symbolic of completion).

“Do for Aaron and his sons everything I have commanded you, taking seven days to ordain them. ³⁶ Sacrifice a bull each day as a sin offering to make atonement. Purify the altar by making atonement for it, and anoint it to consecrate it. ³⁷ For seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy. (Exodus 29:35-7)

Along with the bull mentioned above, 2 lambs were also to be sacrificed daily.

³⁸ “This is what you are to offer on the altar regularly each day: two lambs a year old. ³⁹ Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight. (Exodus 29:38-9)

The sacrifices of lambs were accompanied by twin offerings of bread and wine which, as we saw with Melchizedek, are the symbols of the priesthood.

⁴⁰ With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering. ⁴¹ Sacrifice the other lamb at twilight with the same grain offering and its drink offering as in the morning—a pleasing aroma, an offering made to the LORD by fire. (Exodus 29:40-41)

The priests to be were anointed with oil, which represented a setting apart of the priests for God’s purposes, making them Holy unto the Lord.

⁷ Take the anointing oil and anoint him by pouring it on his head. (Exodus 29:7)

They were also washed with water, speaking of personal cleansing, that is sanctification.

⁴ Then bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and wash them with water. (Exodus 29:4)

And then sprinkled with blood, speaking of legal cleansing, that is justification. After laying hands on the first ram and sacrificing it as an offering to the Lord,

¹⁵ *“Take one of the rams, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head. ¹⁶ Slaughter it and take the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides. ¹⁷ Cut the ram into pieces and wash the inner parts and the legs, putting them with the head and the other pieces. ¹⁸ Then burn the entire ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the LORD, a pleasing aroma, an offering made to the LORD by fire. (Exodus 29:25-18)*

the blood of the second ram was sprinkled on the priests as an act of consecration.

¹⁹ *“Take the other ram, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head. ²⁰ Slaughter it, take some of its blood and put it on the lobes of the right ears of Aaron and his sons, on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet. Then sprinkle blood against the altar on all sides. ²¹ And take some of the blood on the altar and some of the anointing oil and sprinkle it on Aaron and his garments and on his sons and their garments. Then he and his sons and their garments will be consecrated. (Exodus 29:19-21)*

As an ongoing income source, the priests were given most of the various offerings that were brought to be sacrificed.

⁸ *Then the LORD said to Aaron, “I myself have put you in charge of the offerings presented to me; all the holy offerings the Israelites give me I give to you and your sons as your portion and regular share. ⁹ You are to have the part of the most holy offerings that is kept from the fire. From all the gifts they bring me as most holy offerings, whether grain or sin or guilt offerings, that part belongs to you and your sons. ¹⁰ Eat it as something most holy; every male shall eat it. You must regard it as holy. ¹¹ “This also is yours: whatever is set aside from the gifts of all the wave offerings of the Israelites. I give this to you and your sons and daughters as your regular share. Everyone in your household who is ceremonially clean may eat it. ¹² “I give you all the finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and grain they give the LORD as the firstfruits of their harvest. ¹³ All the land’s firstfruits that they bring to the LORD will be yours. Everyone in your household who is ceremonially clean may eat it. ¹⁴ “Everything in Israel that is devoted to the LORD is yours. ¹⁵ The*

first offspring of every womb, both man and animal, that is offered to the LORD is yours. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. ¹⁶ When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. ¹⁷ “But you must not redeem the firstborn of an ox, a sheep or a goat; they are holy. Sprinkle their blood on the altar and burn their fat as an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. ¹⁸ Their meat is to be yours, just as the breast of the wave offering and the right thigh are yours. ¹⁹ Whatever is set aside from the holy offerings the Israelites present to the LORD I give to you and your sons and daughters as your regular share. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD for both you and your offspring.” (Numbers 8:8-19)

THE LEVITES

Before the release of the Israelites from Egypt, in line with the other tribes, the eldest son of the family was set apart as a priest.

God changed this system at Sinai where, as we have seen, He appointed the line of Aaron to the priestly role.

The Levites proved themselves faithful to God, when Aaron didn't, in the terrible incident involving the making of the golden calf.

Aaron bowed to the wishes of the people.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.” ² Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” (Exodus 29:1-4)

The Levites rallied round Moses.

²⁶ So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him. ²⁷ Then he said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” ²⁸ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. (Exodus 29:26-28)

As a reward the Levites as a tribe were set apart to the Lord instead of the oldest son of the family of all the people.

²⁹ Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.” (Exodus 29:29)

The Levites were commissioned to assist the priests in their priestly tasks.

⁸ At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister and to pronounce blessings in his name, as they still do today. (Deuteronomy 10:8)

Part of this commitment was that they weren't allocated any land, in the distribution of the productive, income earning resource of the agricultural society of the time.

⁹ That is why the Levites have no share or inheritance among their brothers; the LORD is their inheritance, as the LORD your God told them.) (Deuteronomy 10:9)

For the Lord was to be their inheritance.

³³ But to the tribe of Levi, Moses had given no inheritance; the LORD, the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as he promised them. (Joshua 13:33)

They were however given 48 cities, including 6 cities of refuge, and a limited amount of communal land around them.

“Six of the towns you give the Levites will be cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone may flee. In addition, give them forty-two other towns.⁷ In all you must give the Levites forty-eight towns, together with their pasturelands.⁸ The towns you give the Levites from the land the Israelites possess are to be given in proportion to the inheritance of each tribe: Take many towns from a tribe that has many, but few from one that has few.” (Numbers 35:6-8)

The tithes of the Israelites were also allocated to the Levites, in recognition of their work for the Lord and because they had no inheritance of land.

²¹ “I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting.²² From now on the Israelites must not go near the Tent of Meeting, or they will bear the consequences of their sin and will die.²³ It is the Levites who are to do the work at the Tent of Meeting and bear the responsibility for offenses against it. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. They will receive no inheritance among the Israelites.²⁴ Instead, I give to the Levites as their inheritance the tithes that the Israelites present as an offering to the LORD. That is why I said concerning them: ‘They will have no inheritance among the Israelites.’” (Numbers 18:21-4)

THE DECLINE OF THE PRIESTHOOD

It did not take long for the priesthood get into strife. Aaron’s two eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu were the first to experience God’s wrath for disobedience to His instructions.

Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command.² So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.³ Moses then said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: “‘Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.’” Aaron remained silent. (Leviticus 10:1-3)

Over time the very human trait of politics came into play. The functions of priesthood and the Levites became blurred and power struggles developed between competing groups.

During the time of Samuel, the elders thought it would be a good idea to remove the Ark (where God's presence dwelled) and take it out of the Tabernacle, located at Shiloh, to support the Israelis in one of their ongoing battles against the Philistines. It didn't work! The Philistines captured the Ark, an act they regretted when they put it into their temple. For their idol god Damon, fell flat on his face before the Ark. They moved the Ark to Gath and Ekron with equally disastrous results. God brought great distress upon the Philistines, including disease, tumours and confusion.

With discretion being the better part of valour, they decided to return the Ark to the Jews.

The ark was returned across the border to Beth Shemesh. Inquisitiveness got the better of the men and 70 were struck down dead for looking inside the Ark!

So the people here too decided to get rid of the Ark. However, instead of returning it to its home in the Tabernacle at Shiloh, they called on the people of Kiriath Jearim to take it away. It remained there for 20 years, at Eleazar's house, all through the reign of King Saul and into the reign of David.

²¹ Then they sent messengers to the people of Kiriath Jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to your place." ¹ So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD. They took it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the LORD. It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the LORD. (1 Samuel 6:21-7:2)

King David came and, after a mishap, took the Ark up to Jerusalem, where he placed it in a simple tent called the Tabernacle of David, where all could now worship God.

This was a political, as well as a religious act; for it reduced the power of the priests remaining in Shiloh to oppose him, as David now had the presence and authority of God with him.

The major point, in our context here, was that the priests and Levites in Shiloh continued with all their religious rituals, even though the Ark, the presence of God, and the sole reason for performing the rituals, had gone! The focus of the priests there had changed to power and politics rather than truly serving the Lord.

Time went on, the 10 tribes disappeared, and then Judea itself was overrun by the Babylonians and the people taken into captivity. But things didn't change with the priesthood.

During the restoration to the Jerusalem area of some of the people after the captivity in Babylon, Nehemiah was forced to clean up the priesthood.

²⁸ One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me. ²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites. ³⁰ So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. (Nehemiah 13:28-30)

This was unsuccessful in the medium term, for a very few years later, the prophet Malachi received a word from the Lord.

Admonition for the Priests

“And now this admonition is for you, O priests. ² If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,” says the LORD Almighty, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me. ³ “Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. ⁴ And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the LORD Almighty. ⁵ “My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. ⁶ True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. ⁷ “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. ⁸ But you have turned from the way

and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty. ⁹ “So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.” (Malachi 2:1-9)

ANOTHER GAP OF 400 YEARS

Most of us know of the approximate 400-year gap between the Old and the New Testaments between c.432-5 BC.

Prior to the 'gap' the Babylonians had destroyed Israel as a nation. From then on, Israel was a minor territory in a succession of empires. The Persians followed the Babylonians. But the most significant influence was the expansion of the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great, who annexed Palestine in 332 BC. Greek influence remained, in various forms, until General Pompey subdued the East for Rome, taking Jerusalem in 63 BC after a 3-month siege of the Temple area. His army killed priests as they were performing their duties, and entered the Holy of Holies, an act the Jews could neither forgive nor forget.

This Greek and then Roman influence set the scene, preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus. The Greeks developed science to a more sophisticated level and with it, the powerful force of humanism we see so much in evidence today. The Romans built the world's first extensive communications network through a magnificent roading system that enabled the message of Jesus to be taken to the known world of the time.

So this 'gap' of 400 years played a vital role in preparing the way for, and identifying the change between, the second and third 'priesthoods'.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS

INTRODUCTION

From before His conception, it was apparent that Jesus was no ‘normal man’.

The angel told Mary:

³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:31-3)

Mary glorified God but she must have had a difficult time explaining things to Joseph, their families, and the community in general! For pregnancy outside of marriage was unacceptable in the society of the time.

The angel foretold His kingly nature, but it took a little more time for His priesthood to be foretold.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

This happened after the birth of Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, through the prophetic song of John’s father, Zechariah. Zechariah, in a manner reminiscent of Abraham long ago, failed to believe that God could make a lady beyond menopause, pregnant. We would likely have similar skepticism!

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” ¹⁹ The angel answered, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.” (Luke 1:18-20)

So he was struck dumb until the time for circumcision of his son John, arrived. However he was still blessed with this amazing prophecy;

⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— ⁷² to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:68-75)

Only a priest could offer salvation to the people, for the priest’s role is to act as an intermediary between man and God.

He was also prophesied to be king ie. Lord (means ruler) by the angel speaking to the shepherds, after His birth.

¹¹ *Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:11)*

His priesthood was confirmed by John at the time of His baptism.

Jesus the Lamb of God

²⁹ *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**” ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘**The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.**’ ³⁴ **I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.**” (John 1:29-34)*

Jesus was the ‘sacrificial lamb’ of God, who as under the Aaronic Priesthood, would be sacrificed for your sins and mine. Thank you Lord.

This contrasts with His other role, as king of kings, represented in the animal world by the lion.

⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” (Revelation 5:5)

His glorious priesthood role is again confirmed in the very next verse.

4 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Revelation 5:6-9)

JESUS AS HIGH PRIEST – BOOK OF HEBREWS

The priesthood of Jesus is dealt with in great detail in the Book of Hebrews.

There are 2 books of the New Testament that have been acknowledged as particularly hard to understand, being Hebrews and Revelation.

While much of the Book of Revelation remains closed, or misunderstood, with multitudinous interpretations and arguments over its meaning by many learned people, in recent times, as we approach the final days, God has now chosen to reveal to His people a greater understanding of the Book of Hebrews.

Revelation will follow, in His time and timing.

In the meantime we are being given a greater glimpse of the priesthood of Jesus. The full revelation will only be truly recognised when we see Him in glory or upon His glorious return to the earth!

I would recommend that you read and meditate upon the complete Book of Hebrews as we will only be able to deal with highlights here. It is a hugely rewarding study.

1. The Superiority of God's New Revelation: (*Hebrews 1:1-4*)

Jesus is supreme, a mirror of the Father, and far superior to the angels. He provided the priestly function of *purification for sins* and he intercedes for us at *the right hand of the Majesty in heaven*.

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” (*Hebrews 1:3*)

2. Christ is Superior to Old Covenant Leadership: (*Hebrews 1:5-7:28*)

a. Superior to the Angels: (*1:5-2:18*)

Jesus had to be made like us, his (spiritual) brothers, in order to successfully make atonement for us.

“To which of the angels did God ever say, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”? Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” (*Hebrews 1:13-14*)

b. Superior to Moses: (*3:1-4:13*)

Moses was the one the Jews looked up to as being closest to God. But Jesus is greater than he.

“Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself.” (*Hebrews 3:3*)

We are warned not to become like the Jews, who constantly disobeyed Moses, but to obey Jesus.

“We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we had at first.” (*Hebrews 3:14*)

and invited to enter our Sabbath-rest through Him.

“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God, for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”
(Hebrews 4:9-10)

For God knows us better than we know ourselves!

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

He is indeed, the Great High Priest whom we may approach with confidence!

Jesus the Great High Priest

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Priests under the Aaronic order were human appointed and imperfect, having to sacrifice for their own sins before sacrificing for others. Jesus was appointed by God Himself.

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴ No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” (Hebrews 5:1-5)

Jesus was not in the order of Aaron, but rather, in that of the first priesthood, that of Melchizedec, whom we discussed earlier.

And he says in another place, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”⁷ During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:6-10)

Perfection was not available through the Aaronic priesthood.

¹¹ If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? (Hebrews 7:11)

When a priesthood changes, the law also must change. The law under Melchizedec was oral, passed down from generation to generation, while under the Aaronic priesthood, it was written, given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

¹² For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. (Hebrews 7:12)

The change was made clear in that Jesus was of a different tribe to the Levitical priests.

¹³ He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar.¹⁴ For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. (Hebrews 7:13-14)

Jesus became High Priest, not through inheritance or appointment, but rather, as with Melchizedec, through perfection.

¹⁵ And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears,¹⁶ one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible

life. ¹⁷ For it is declared: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 7:15-17)

As mentioned above, the change in priesthood was necessary because of imperfection and kept the people away from God.

¹⁸ The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. (Hebrews 7:18-19)

Old Testament priests came to their position through birth, Jesus through an oath.

²⁰ And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, ²¹ but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’” ²² Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. (Hebrews 7:20-22)

Jesus’ was an eternal appointment!

²³ Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. (Hebrews 7:23-5)

His self-sacrifice meant He could continue to save us and intercede for us forever! Hallelujah!

²⁶ Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. (Hebrews 7:26-8)

He made a ‘New Covenant’ for us, one based upon grace rather than law, an internal, heart covenant, replacing one of external laws and direction. A

covenant of forgiveness, now available to all who believe. The Old has passed away, the New is eternal!

The High Priest of a New Covenant

8 *The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. ³ Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. ⁴ If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. ⁵ They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” ⁶ But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. ⁷ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸ But God found fault with the people and said: “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ⁹ It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” ¹³ By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear. (Hebrews 8:1-13)*

The remainder of the Book of Hebrews goes on to explain the ramifications of the New Covenant, the new, final, eternal priesthood of Jesus, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

THE PRIESTHOOD TODAY

AN INHERITANCE FROM JESUS TO US

Through His death on the cross, through the very blood of Jesus shed for us, we have been adopted into His family and been made *a kingdom and priests to reign on the earth.*

⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:6-10)

We have been adopted into the family of Jesus.

⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. (Ephesians 1:4-6)

This is confirmed many times throughout the New Testament. Three examples follow.

¹⁰ In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. (Hebrews 2:10-11)

Jesus' Mother and Brothers

⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” ⁴⁸ He replied to him, “*Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?*” ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, “*Here are my mother and my brothers.*” ⁵⁰ *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*” (Matthew 12:46-50)

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:28-9)

Along with our adoption into the family of Jesus comes a responsibility to live in the way that Jesus did, to be totally obedient to the will of the Father in living our lives.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ² *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.* (Romans 12:1-2)

And again.

¹⁰ *This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.* (1 John 2:10)

Being members of God’s family we are disciplined by our Father!

⁷ *Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?* ⁸ *If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.* (Hebrews 12:7-8)

Priesthood comes with sonship! And sonship comes with both blessings and sacrifice, as illustrated above. You may also remember from earlier in our study that priesthood involves both blessings and sacrifice. Sonship and priesthood therefore are intimately related.

EARLY NEW TESTAMENT PRIESTHOOD

In early New Testament times the universal priesthood of believers was accepted and practiced without question. There was no question of establishing another separate priesthood class, other than the one of believers and Jesus.

Jesus is our ‘high priest’.

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. (Hebrews 4:14)

And we are all members of His priesthood, as ‘royal priests’.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

And we are to individually approach His throne of grace.

¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

Jesus had been so critical of the Pharisees and religious rulers that great care was taken not to set up another religious class.

Of course there are always leaders, formal or informal, when you groups of people together. People were assigned roles such as deacons and overseers. However, while there were moral qualifications no elevated ‘religious role’ was given or implied.

Overseers and Deacons

3 *Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. ⁵ (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. ⁷ He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.*

⁸ Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁹ They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

¹¹ In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

¹² A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. ¹³ Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 3:1-13)

In fact, leaders were not expected to fulfill a superior religious function, but rather, to be servants of the people they were leading. This actually is a principle established, though not often lived, from Old Testament times.

The great Moses was a servant.

And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. (Deuteronomy 34:5)

Isaiah prophesied (which Jesus quoted) that the Messiah would be the ultimate servant.

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. ² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. ³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth

justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.” (Isaiah 42:1-4)

Paul too, acknowledged his servant leadership role, at the start of many of his epistles. For example, in Philippians;

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: (Philippians 1:1)

For a more detailed exposition of the principle of servant leadership, see A REVELATION OF... SERVANTHOOD AND LEADERSHIP, found on the internet at <http://www.wwj.org.nz/pdf/wwj25p50.pdf>

THE DECLINE OF THE CHURCH

The church grew, and naturally, leadership numbers grew also.

With the end of the first apostolic age, marked by the death of the apostle John, round 100AD, the principles on which the church operated started to move away from a spiritual orientation to an increasingly worldlier one.

By the end of the second century, two leaders of the church, Hippolytus and Tertullian, revived the notion of a set apart, special priesthood, from ordinary believers.

By the end of the 4th century, following the Roman Emperor Constantine’s Romanization and institutionalism of the church, the priestly office was again formalized and the laity reduced to second class status in ministry.

This resulted in the Dark Ages! Dark because people were discouraged, effectively prevented, from relating directly with the ‘light’, that is Jesus. The people were taught to follow the priests, rather than Jesus.

¹² When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

EMERGENCE FROM THE DARK AGES

We tend to think of the Reformation as being instigated entirely by Luther. However the end of the Dark ages and the beginning of the reformation of the church effectively began with the Bible being translated into the modern languages of the time and being able to become more widely available through the invention of the printing press.

The Biblical concept of the universal priesthood of all believers was revived by radical groups such as the Lollards, adopted by Luther and became one of the central tenets of Protestantism.

The Reformed Churches struggled with the practical application of this principle. Some, such as the Brethren avoided formal leadership and titles diligently, while others eventually appointed ‘ministers’ (literally meaning ‘servant’), in the case of the Baptists, to be subject to the laity.

THE REALITY TODAY

With a few exceptions, most churches today have titled, paid clergy, to run the church. This is accepted, indeed encouraged by the congregations, for it absolves them of the responsibility for doing the work. Sadly too, many prefer to have an intermediary between themselves and God, rather than seeking Him for themselves.

From what I have both read and observed, there is a pattern of supposed ‘maturity’ that happens within a church grouping.

Since the time of the Reformation, God has gradually been re-establishing His truths, slowly lost from the end of the first century, after the end of the first apostolic age, back into the church.

This re-establishment has been a slow process, involving many groups of people, because of the pattern we are about to see.

God is always seeking people who are dissatisfied with the present level of revelation and want more of Him. For we will never know all there is to know about God until the return of Jesus, God in the flesh.

Through the Holy Spirit, God gives a new revelation to a group of such people. These people are on fire! Sold out to God! Enthusiastic to spread the revelation they have been given! Highly evangelistic! Meet in informal groups! Have leaders but not superiors! The leadership is sold out to the people and is voluntary.

The movement grows. People are attracted to the people, mostly the leaders, rather than the revelation. The leaders get lifted up. We need to get organized. There are so many of us now that we need a church building to meet in. Our leadership must be full time to look after us. Religion kicks in. We need to give leaders titles. We must group together in a formal denomination to preserve what God has given us.

Now the leaders start to think that the next generation of leaders needs to be trained in the ways of the group, in their God given revelation, so that it can be perpetuated. A Bible School is set up, at first informally, then as a Theological College offering degrees. Now, of course, all future leaders must have our degree. We develop a pay scale - and superannuation. The leadership role soon becomes a job rather than a calling. We see those in leadership as being different, (and superior) to the congregants. People come to rely upon us. We become a new informal priesthood, being intermediaries between our people and God. And of course, we have it all. We are successful, for we have the latest and final revelation - not like that other old church down the road!

Gradually, the former radical, revelatory grouping develops their own way of doing things, becoming mature and a part of the establishment. Listening to God goes out the window - for this is the way we do things around here. Religion replaces revelation. Form overcomes substance. Enthusiasm is stifled by tradition.

God cries!

He searches out another group of people who are hungry for Him.

Sadly, we never learn, and the process repeats itself. And so today, we have great numbers of denominations with a fantastic godly heritage but who, in reality, are spiritually dying or dead.

You may think I am exaggerating but I do ask you to prayerfully consider what is written above to see where you are in your walk with Jesus. Can God get through to you or have you placed boundaries of precious theology and tradition in the way?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Interestingly the concept of the priesthood of all believers, of kingdom and priests, is a concept found from nearly the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New.

*⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a **kingdom of priests** and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:5-6)*

Indirectly confirmed, for example, in Psalms;

²³ He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.” (Psalm 50:23)

This is found throughout the New Testament, as we shall see, and concludes in Revelation in the same way it started in Exodus.

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a **kingdom and priests** to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Revelation 1:5-6)*

And then;

*⁹ And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a **kingdom and priests** to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:10-11)*

The institution of communion has been used as justification for a ministerial priesthood because Jesus and Paul gave it, but this is truly clutching at straws.

For the truth is that we are all priests and equally able to participate in the giving and receiving of communion.

In fact, the concept of a new, separate priesthood is simply missing from both the teachings of Jesus and those of the other New Testament writers.

If there was to be another priesthood, it would have had to have been established by Jesus. The Roman Catholic Church would have said initially that Peter was the priestly rock upon whom the church was founded but, without getting into detail, it is obvious that ‘the rock’ is Jesus himself.

³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:3-4)

Therefore there can only be the one priesthood today.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

The book of 1 Peter deals with this reality and should be regular, compulsory reading for all believers! We are individually to come to Jesus as a holy priesthood.

The Living Stone and a Chosen People

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” ⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,” ⁸ and, “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. (1 Peter 2:4-8)

This is summed up in verse 9.

⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)*

This fact that there is only one mediator, one priest between God and mankind, is confirmed by Timothy.

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time. (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

It is worth repeating the scriptures from Hebrews that tell us that human priests have always been weak, but that we now have an eternal, holy, blameless priest who is exalted above the heavens! Hallelujah! That is the priest I want and need!

²³ *Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. ²⁶ Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. (Hebrews 7:23-8)*

We have seen earlier that we are all sons of God, members of His family along with Jesus.

²⁶ *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, (Galatians 3:26)*

There is no difference between believers, there are no classes of believers, and there is no priesthood other than the priesthood of Jesus. In Christ we are all one.

²⁸ *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* ²⁹ *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:28-29)*

You may think that you are not good enough to come to God through Jesus yourself, but this is not the case. For when we believe, we are forgiven of all our sins through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

²² *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,* ²³ *to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,* ²⁴ *to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)*

As Isaiah prophesied, we are clothed in a robe of righteousness that enables us to approach the very throne of God, even though we aren't yet perfect in the natural.

¹⁰ *I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, (Isaiah 61:10a)*

Jesus alone is the head of the church.

¹⁸ *And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (Colossians 1:18)*

Jesus alone is God and we have received fullness in belonging to Him.

⁹ *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,* ¹⁰ *and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. (Colossians 2:9)*

Jesus is king over all.

⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. (Ephesians 1:22-3)

We must not let any intermediary come between ourselves and Jesus.

How is your relationship with Jesus today?

THE RETURN OF JESUS TO REIGN AND RULE

Of course, the culmination of God's work through Jesus, is for Jesus to rule and reign on the earth for 1000 years, with His priests, the martyrs, both physical and spiritual, as part of the first resurrection. Again, no intermediaries here!

The Thousand Years

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

*⁴ I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, **but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.** (Revelation 20:1-6)*

Then we have the second resurrection, after which Jesus will reign forever.

The Seventh Trumpet

¹⁵ The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of

our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)

Confirmed here.

The River of Life

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. ⁶ The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.” (Revelation 22:1-6)

Every true disciple of Jesus looks forward to His return. For we all wish to see the glorious consummation of the priesthood of Jesus.

Jesus Is Coming

⁷ *“Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”* ⁸ I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. ⁹ But he said to me, “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!” ¹⁰ Then he told me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. ¹¹ Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.” ¹² *“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. ¹⁴ “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs, those who*

practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. ¹⁶ “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.” ¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (Revelation 22:7-17)

In the meantime we need to prepare ourselves for His return.

Come Jesus, come.