

AARON

From the time Moses set out to free Israel from Egypt, Aaron his brother played an important part in the young nation's development. He remained in a position of influence and responsibility until the day of his death, forty years later ([Exod 7:7](#); [Num 33:39](#)).

Early developments

Although Aaron was three years older than Moses ([Exod 7:7](#)), he willingly accepted Moses' supreme leadership of the nation. He became Moses' chief spokesman and personal assistant ([Exod 4:10-16](#); [4:29-30](#); [7:1-2,10,19](#); [8:5,17,25](#)). As Moses grew in confidence, he became less dependent upon Aaron in his public activities ([Exod 9:13,22,33](#)). Aaron, however, continued to support Moses, especially in prayer ([Exod 17:12](#)).

Aaron was one of the privileged few who went with Moses up on to the mountain of God. He was also one of those to whom Moses entrusted the leadership of Israel during his absence ([Exod 24:1-2,9,14](#)). Aaron proved to be a weak leader, and was easily persuaded to build an idol as a visible symbol of the invisible God ([Exod 32:1-6,21-25](#)). When Moses challenged the faithful to fight against this idolatry, the men of the tribe of Levi responded. God rewarded them by promising that in the new religious order, the Levites would be his chosen religious servants ([Exod 32:26-29](#)).

Levi was the tribe to which Moses and Aaron belonged ([Exod 6:16-20](#)). God had already told Moses that in the new religious order, Aaron and his sons were to be the priests, with Aaron the high priest ([Exod 28:1-4](#)). In the generations to follow, although all Levites were to be religious officials, only those of the family of Aaron could be priests ([Num 3:3-10](#); see [Levites](#); [Priests](#)).

Troubles along the way

In spite of his devoted service to God, Aaron had his disappointments and failures. His two older sons made an offering contrary to the way God had instructed them, and were punished with instant death ([Lev 10:1-3](#)). On another occasion, he and his sister Miriam showed some jealousy against Moses because of Moses' supreme position in Israel. When Miriam, who had led the criticism, was punished with leprosy, Aaron confessed his wrong and asked God to heal her ([Num 12:1-2,9-12](#)).

Just as Aaron had been jealous of Moses' position as supreme leader, so other Levites grew jealous of Aaron's position as high priest ([Num 16:1-11](#)). God destroyed the rebels ([Num 16:31-35](#)) and sent a plague on the people who had supported them; but Aaron prayed for them and the plague stopped ([Num 16:47-48](#)). By the miraculous budding of Aaron's rod, God emphasized afresh that only those of the family of Aaron were to be priests ([Num 17:1-11](#)).

Moses and Aaron were guilty of disobedience to God when, in anger at the people's constant complaining, they struck the rock at Meribah. God punished them by assuring them that they would never enter the promised land ([Num 20:2,10-13](#)). Soon after, when the journeying Israelites reached Mt Hor, Aaron died. Before he died, however, there was a public ceremony to appoint Eleazar, Aaron's eldest surviving son, as the replacement high priest ([Num 20:22-29](#)).

Aaron

The eldest son of Amram and Jochebed, a daughter of Levi ([Ex 6:20](#)). Some explain the name as meaning mountaineer, others mountain of strength, illuminator. He was born in Egypt three years before his brother Moses, and a number of years after his sister Miriam ([Ex 2:1, 4](#); [Ex 7:7](#)). He married Elisheba, the daughter of Amminadab of the house of Judah ([Ex 6:23](#); [1Ch 2:10](#)), by whom he had four sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. When the time for the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt drew nigh, he was sent by God ([Ex 4:14, 27-30](#)) to meet his long-absent brother, that he might co-operate with him in all that they were required to do in bringing about the Exodus. He was to be the "mouth" or "prophet" of Moses, i.e., was to speak for him, because he was a man of a ready utterance ([Ex 7:1, 2, 9, 10, 19](#)). He was faithful to his trust, and stood by Moses in all his interviews with Pharaoh.

When the ransomed tribes fought their first battle with Amalek in Rephidim, Moses stood on a hill overlooking the scene of the conflict with the rod of God in his outstretched hand. On this occasion he was attended by Aaron and Hur, his sister's husband, who held up his wearied hands till Joshua and the chosen warriors of Israel gained the victory ([Ex 17:8-13](#)).

Afterwards, when encamped before Sinai, and when Moses at the command of God ascended the mount to receive the tables of the law, Aaron and his two sons, Nadab and Abihu, along with seventy of the elders of Israel, were permitted to accompany him part of the way, and to behold afar off the manifestation of the glory of Israel's God ([Ex 19:24](#); [Ex 24:9-11](#)). While Moses remained on the mountain with God, Aaron returned unto the people; and yielding through fear, or ignorance, or instability of character, to their clamour, made unto them a golden calf, and set it up as an object of worship ([Ex 32:4](#); [Ps 106:19](#)). On the return of Moses to the camp, Aaron was sternly rebuked by him for the part he had acted in this matter; but he interceded for him before God, who forgave his sin ([Deut 9:20](#)).

On the mount, Moses received instructions regarding the system of worship which was to be set up among the people; and in accordance therewith Aaron and his sons were consecrated to the priest's office ([Lev 8](#); [Lev 9](#)). Aaron, as high priest, held henceforth the prominent place appertaining to that office.

When Israel had reached Hazeroth, in "the wilderness of Paran," Aaron joined with his sister Miriam in murmuring against Moses, "because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married," probably after the death of Zipporah. But the Lord vindicated his servant Moses, and punished Miriam with leprosy ([Num 12](#)). Aaron acknowledged his own and his sister's guilt, and at the intercession of Moses they were forgiven.

Twenty years after this, when the children of Israel were encamped in the wilderness of Paran, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram conspired against Aaron and his sons; but a fearful judgment from God fell upon them, and they were destroyed, and the next day thousands of the people also perished by a fierce pestilence, the ravages of which were only stayed by the interposition of Aaron ([Num 16](#)). That there might be further evidence of the divine appointment of Aaron to the priestly office, the chiefs of the tribes were each required to bring to Moses a rod bearing on it the name of his tribe. And these, along with the rod of Aaron for the tribe of Levi, were laid up overnight in the tabernacle, and in the morning it was found that while the other rods remained unchanged, that of Aaron "for the house of Levi" budded, blossomed, and yielded almonds ([Num 17:1-10](#)). This rod was afterwards preserved in the tabernacle ([Heb 9:4](#)) as a memorial of the divine attestation of his appointment to the priesthood.

Aaron was implicated in the sin of his brother at Meribah ([Num 20:8-13](#)), and on that account was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. When the tribes arrived at Mount Hor, "in the edge of the land of Edom," at the command of God Moses led Aaron and his son Eleazar to the top of that mountain, in the sight of all the people. There he stripped Aaron of his priestly vestments, and put them upon Eleazar; and there Aaron died on the top of the mount, being 123 years old ([Num 20:23-29](#); Compare [Deut 10:6](#); [Deut 32:50](#)), and was "gathered unto his people." The people, "even all the house of Israel," mourned for him thirty days. Of Aaron's sons two survived him, Eleazar, whose family held the high-priesthood till the time of Eli; and Ithamar, in whose family, beginning with Eli, the high-priesthood was held till the time of Solomon. Aaron's other two sons had been struck dead ([Lev 10:1, 2](#)) for the daring impiety of offering "strange fire" on the alter of incense.

The Arabs still show with veneration the traditionary site of Aaron's grave on one of the two summits of Mount Hor, which is marked by a Mohammedan chapel. His name is mentioned in the Koran, and there are found in the writings of the rabbins many fabulous stories regarding him.

He was the first anointed priest. His descendants, "the house of Aaron," constituted the priesthood in general. In the time of David they were very numerous ([1Ch 12:27](#)). The other branches of the tribe of Levi held subordinate positions in connection with the sacred office. Aaron was a type of Christ in his official character as the high priest. His priesthood was a "shadow of heavenly things," and was intended to lead the people of Israel to look forward to the time when "another priest" would arise "after the order of Melchizedek" ([Heb 6:20](#)).

Illustrated Bible Dictionary: And Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature.

PRIESTS AND LEVITES

Servants of God in the OT. There were three basic classes of religious personnel in ancient Israel: prophets, wise men, and priests and Levites. The classical prophets fulfilled a vocation but were not professionals; they were not paid for their task and functioned only in response to the particular call of God. The wise men were involved in government and education; some of their duties were secular, though they were also involved in moral education. The priests and Levites fulfilled a variety of essentially religious duties and were equivalent approximately to the clergy in modern times. They were professional men and were supported for their full-time religious work.

The role of the priesthood may be seen most clearly in the context of Israelite religion as a whole. At the heart of religion was a relationship with God; to be an Israelite or a Jew was to know and maintain a continuous relationship with the living God. This relationship found its outward expression in a variety of contexts: the covenant, the temple, worship, and every facet of daily life. Thus religion, understood as a relationship, had two perspectives: the relationship with God and that with fellow human beings. It had both a personal and a communal dimension to it. The priests were the guardians and servants of this life of relationship, which was at the heart of OT religion; all their functions can best be understood within the context of a relationship between God and Israel. The prophets, too, were servants of the covenant relationship. While the priests functioned as the normal servants of religion, the prophets' role was more that of calling a delinquent people back to the relationship with God in times of crisis.

In the OT, there are frequent references to both priests and Levites; in a number of biblical texts, however, the distinction is not clear (see, e.g., Dt 18:1-8). From the scholarly point of view, the precise relationship between priests and Levites is a continuing problem that has not yet been fully resolved. In general terms, only the sons of Aaron were to assume the role of priests; all other Levites would have religious functions, though technically they would not be priests. While this distinction is clear in most biblical texts, in others there is lack of certainty and clarity. It is clear, however, that priests (Levites descended from Aaron) and Levites (other than the descendants of Aaron) all had professional religious duties to perform. The precise nature of those duties varied from time to time in the course of Israel's history.

The priesthood in Israel began during the time of Moses and Aaron. The exodus from Egypt was not only the liberation of a group of Hebrew slaves but also the birth of the nation of Israel. The nation that was born in the exodus was given its constitution in the covenant of Sinai. The law of this covenant established the foundations and origins of Israelite priesthood. It provides insight into the three basic categories to be considered: the high priest, the priests, and the Levites.

The High Priest

Any large and complex organization requires a head or leader, and this was true also of the Hebrew priesthood (though in its early days it was a small organization). The covenant was established through Moses, the prophet, through whom God gave the offer and substance of the covenant relationship; religious life within the covenant was to be the primary responsibility of Aaron, who was the first and chief priest.

In the earliest days of Israel's priesthood, it is probable that the high priest's office was relatively informal; he was chief or leader among his fellow priests. The office was significant, nevertheless, and involved a special ritual of investiture, special clothing, and certain special responsibilities. While the high priest's duties were similar in principle to those of other priests, he had certain exclusive responsibilities. To some extent, his duties were administrative, pertaining to all the priests of whom he had charge. But his position was more weighty than that of an administrator; just as all priests were the servants and guardians of the covenant relationship, so the high priest was chief servant and chief guardian. In his hands rested spiritual responsibility for the entire people of God, and therein lay the true honor and gravity of his position.

Chestpiece Worn by the High Priest

This spiritual seniority of the high priest is seen most clearly in certain tasks he undertook within Israel's life of worship. The clearest example may be seen in the annual observation of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). On that day alone, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and, standing before the "mercy seat," he sought God's forgiveness and mercy for the whole nation of Israel (Lv 16:1-19). It is in that ceremony that Israel's covenant faith is seen most clearly. Israel's religion was one of relationship with a holy God, and human evil disrupted that relationship. While all worship and sacrifices throughout the year were concerned with the continuation of the relationship, the Day of Atonement was the most solemn day of the year, in which the attention of all the people focused upon the meaning of their existence. Life held meaning only if the relationship with God could be maintained; the high priest had the great honor and heavy burden of seeking God's mercy for all Israel.

The special clothing worn by the high priest was symbolic of the nature and importance of his office; although all the symbolism cannot be determined, some of it is made dear in the biblical text. There are three particular themes in the symbolism. The first is beauty. The sense of beauty emerges from the quality and design of all the items of clothing, together with the use of color and precious stones. But beauty is dominant in the breastplate; the Hebrew word translated approximately as "breastplate" has as its basic sense "beauty" or "excellence." The clothing symbolizes beauty, while beauty describes the office; the two other themes associated with the symbolism bring out the excellence of the office.

The second theme is the role of the priest as representative of Israel before God. This essential dimension of the office of the high priest is explicitly identified in the names of the tribes of Israel in the two onyx stones in the ephod, and in the 12 precious stones attached to the breastplate. The high priest entered God's presence to seek deliverance from God's judgment (the breastplate is identified with judgment; Ex 28:15) for his people and in order to keep the people constantly in God's remembrance (v 12), as symbolized by the two onyx stones. The third theme is the role of high priest as the representative of God to Israel. This dimension of the office is seen in the Urim and Thummim, kept in the breastpiece, by means of which God made known his will to Israel. The high priest, Aaron, fully robed, was a splendid figure, and the splendor of his garments indicated the magnificence of the office with which he had been entrusted.

The high priesthood was to be passed on within the family (for the high priest was expected to be a married man), although in later history the practice was not always adhered to. On Aaron's death, the office passed to Eleazar, one of his four sons.

The Priests

Priests took office not as the result of a particular vocation but by virtue of priestly descent. Thus the first priests were the four sons of Aaron: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. These four were ordained at the same time that Aaron was ordained high priest (Ex 28:1). Like him, they had special clothing, which was basically similar, though it lacked the distinctive garments of the high priest (the special ephod, the breastpiece, and the crown). The priesthood would be passed down through their sons.

The sanctity of the priestly office was such that it was preserved from degeneration through specific laws. A man must be a descendant of Aaron to be a priest, but he was also required to meet a variety of other qualifications. He would not marry a divorcee or a former prostitute (Lv 21:7). If he was afflicted by certain kinds of disease or congenital defects, he was barred from priestly office (e.g., blindness, lameness, mutilation, being a hunchback or dwarf; vv 16-23). The principle involved was similar to that applying to animals used in sacrifice—only those free from defect or blemish were suitable for divine service.

In the earliest days of the priesthood there is some information provided in the biblical text concerning the specific duties of the priests. Eleazar had overall responsibility for the tabernacle and its offerings (Num 4:16); assisted Moses in a number of duties, such as numbering the people and dividing the land (26:1-2; 32:2); and later served as an adviser to Joshua. Ithamar was responsible for the construction of the tabernacle (Ex 38:21) and supervised the families of the Gershonites and Merarites (Num 4:28-33). Nadab and Abihu, however, died soon after their ordination as a result of a sinful act in their priestly duties (Lv 10:1-7), which may have been related in part to drunkenness (vv 8-9).

Priestly duties, in general, fell into three areas (Dt 33:8-10). First, priests were responsible, in conjunction with the high priest, for declaring God's will to the people. Second, they had responsibilities in religious education; they were to teach to Israel God's ordinances and law (v 10). Third, they were to be the servants of the tabernacle, participating in Israel's sacrifices and worship. There were a number of other duties that may have fallen to them, which they would have shared with the Levites in general.

The priests, along with all other Levites, did not own any land, as did the other Israelite tribes. Their task was to be entirely in the direct service to God. The absence of land, however, meant that they could not support and feed themselves as could other men and women. Consequently, the law specified that they could be supported for their services by the people as a whole. They were to receive, from worshipers, portions of animals that were brought to the tabernacle, as well as corn, wine, oil, and wool.

The Levites

This term includes the priests, in a broad sense, for the sons of Aaron belonged to the tribe of Levi. For practical purposes, however, the Levites were those of the tribe other than the priests. The Levites also functioned in the service of the tabernacle, though they had a subordinate position. They, too, were professional men and were paid in money and in kind for their services. Though they did not inherit tribal territory of their own, there were a number of cities set aside for their use (Num 35:1-8), and pasturelands were designated outside those cities for their livestock.

The Levites were divided into three principal families, the descendants of Kohath, Gershon, and Merari (Num 4). Each of these families had particular responsibilities with respect to the care and transport of the tabernacle. The sons of Kohath carried the tabernacle furniture (after it had been covered by the priests), the sons of Gershon cared for the coverings and screens, and the sons of Merari carried and erected the tabernacle's frame. The priests, by contrast, were responsible for the transportation of the ark of the covenant. The role of each Levite, as servant of the tabernacle, was restricted; he undertook his professional duties between the ages of 25 and 50 (8:24-26).

Although many of the duties of the Levites were of a mundane nature, they also had a very significant religious role. The law required that all the firstborn, including firstborn sons, be given to God, recalling the slaying of the firstborn at the exodus from Egypt. The Levites' role in religion was that of being accepted by God in the place of the firstborn sons of Israel (Num 3:11-13); their cattle, too, were accepted in place of the Israelites' firstborn cattle. In the census taken in the time of Moses, the firstborn Israelites exceeded the number of the Levites, and a five-shekel redemption fee had to be paid into the priestly coffers for each person in excess (vv 40-51). The representative and substitutionary nature of the Levites can be seen in Israelite religion. Like the priests, they played a part in the larger activity of mediation between God and Israel.

The law of Deuteronomy specifies a number of duties that may have fallen upon both priests and Levites (though the texts are ambiguous). These duties included participation in the activity of the law courts as judges, perhaps with special reference to religious crimes (Dt 17:8-9), taking care of the Book of the Law (v 18), controlling the lives and health of lepers (24:8), and participating directly in the conduct of covenant renewal ceremonies (27:9).

The History of the Institution

In theory, the covenant law of Moses determined the nature and course of the offices of priests and Levites for the future history of Israel. In practice, however, changing historical circumstances and changes in the shape of Israel's religion and culture altered the shape of the priesthood and the role of the Levites from time to time. And even more significantly, the persons who held the offices shaped them and their effectiveness through their faithfulness or unfaithfulness.

The Priesthood before the Monarchy

In the time of Joshua, the priests continued to undertake their important task of carrying the ark of the covenant. The Levites assisted in the division and allocation of the newly acquired land among the Israelite tribes. In Joshua 21, there is a detailed list of the allocation of cities to both priests and Levites, in fulfillment of the earlier legislation. In the days of the settlement, beyond the Conquest, there is some evidence that the Levites took over the priestly duty of transporting the ark (1 Sm 6:15; 2 Sm 15:24).

The writer of the book of Judges has recorded two stories that illuminate the lives of particular Levites. The first, the story of Micah (Judg 17-18), describes the establishment of a local shrine in which Micah's son was appointed as a priest (though he was not of Levite or Aaronic descent). Later, Micah hired an itinerant Levite to function as a priest in his shrine, though subsequently that Levite was persuaded to serve the tribe of Dan as a priest. It is difficult to fit the details of this story into the theoretical model of priests and Levites, though the

story may illustrate the confused state of Israel's religion at the time. What is particularly significant is that the role of the Levite-priest was primarily oracular (18:5-6). The second story in Judges is the rather horrifying account of a Levite and his concubine (ch 19). The story illustrates the moral decline and lack of law and order in Israel at the time, but it sheds little light on the role of the Levites.

More information is provided about the priesthood during the 11th century bc, immediately before the establishment of the monarchy. The tabernacle (by now probably a semipermanent structure) and the ark of the covenant were located in Shiloh. The priest in charge of the sanctuary in Shiloh was Eli, who may have been a descendant of Aaron's son Ithamar. His two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, also served as priests, indicating that the principle of family descent was still operative with respect to the priesthood. But although Eli was a faithful priest, his two sons abused the office.

The precise role of Samuel in this period is unclear. He was primarily a judge and a prophet, but it is difficult to determine whether he was also a priest. In the historical narrative, he is not called a priest, though Psalm 99:6 might be interpreted to indicate his priestly office. There are a number of passages, however, that indicate he acted like a priest. For example, he offered sacrifices (1 Sm 7:9-10); as a young man he served in the sanctuary of Shiloh and wore an ephod (ch 2). Furthermore, one of the biblical genealogies implies priestly descent (1 Chr 6:23-30). Nevertheless, he is not normally identified as a priest and the introduction to his story refers to him as an Ephraimite, by descent from his father (1 Sm 1:1), not a Levite. If the priest is perceived as a permanent servant of the sanctuary, as was Eli, then it is clear that Samuel was not a priest. But the priestly role of Samuel may perhaps be related to the fact that his mother "lent" him to God (v 28) while he was still a boy.

The Priesthood during the Time of David and Solomon

Several radical changes took place during the reign of David and Solomon. These were a result, primarily, of the establishment of a permanent temple in Jerusalem and the installation of the ark of the covenant there. During the time of Saul, the first king of Israel, the social structure was essentially the same as it had been in the time of the judges. Saul, as king, was a military leader, but his relationship to religion and the priesthood was not clearly determined. David changed the situation in many important respects. After his capture of the city of Jerusalem, he made that place the political and religious capital of his nation. The religious centrality of Jerusalem was assured by moving the ark of the covenant there, together with the tabernacle. Jerusalem now became the permanent location of the ark, and therefore the permanent center of religion; at the same time, the various regional shrines, which had developed in the premonarchical period, were gradually eliminated.

These changes had numerous implications for the priesthood and the Levites. During David's reign, there were two principal priests, Abiathar and Zadok. Abiathar, a former priest of Nob, had joined David before his rise to power; he appears to have been a descendant of Eli, and through him of Ithamar, one of Aaron's sons. Zadok's background is less clear, though his lineage appears to go back to Aaron's other son, Eleazar. These two priests are always named together in the texts describing David's reign, and Zadok is always mentioned before Abiathar. Although neither is explicitly identified as high priest in the ancient texts, there is some evidence to suggest that Abiathar functioned as high priest (1 Kgs 2:35); in NT times, he is identified as such (Mk 2:26). Zadok, during David's reign, may have been particularly responsible for the care of the ark of the covenant (2 Sm 15:24-25). These two priests had a significant position in David's royal establishment; they may also have shared overall responsibility for the priests, whose lives were now centered on the Jerusalem temple.

Much of David's time was focused upon the preparations for building a permanent temple for God. In the preparation for the temple, and in its completion during the reign of King Solomon, the new activities of the Levites may be seen. (The construction of a permanent temple automatically removed their former responsibilities related to the care and transportation of the tabernacle.) Large numbers of Levites were employed as laborers in the actual building of the temple. Others found new tasks in the worship of God in the tabernacle during David's reign and in the temple upon its completion. To the Levites, and especially to Heman, Asaph, and Ethan, was given primary responsibility for the music of worship; this involved not only singing but also the playing of a variety of instruments in the temple's orchestra or band. The Levites had also a variety of other tasks; they worked as gatekeepers at the sanctuary, assisted the priests in the preparation of sacrifices, kept the sanctuary clean, and functioned as general administrative and legal officers (1 Chr 23:1-32). Other Levites functioned as bankers, with primary responsibility for the temple treasuries (26:20-28).

Following David's death, there was a dispute over the royal succession, from which Solomon emerged as the new king. During his reign, the temple was brought to its completion and the regular worship of the nation was conducted there. In the matter of succession, however, Abiathar had supported a losing candidate, and when Solomon was made king, he lost his important office in the royal court. During Solomon's reign, the control of the priesthood passed into the hands of Zadok.

The Priesthood during the Divided Monarchy

The great empire, which had been built by David and maintained by Solomon, collapsed after Solomon's death. From the ruins, two new and relatively insignificant states emerged. The southern kingdom, Judah, retained Jerusalem as its capital and the temple as its center of worship. The northern kingdom, Israel, located its first capital at Shechem, from where it was later moved to Tirzah. In the southern state of Judah, the priests and Levites continued to function normally within the Jerusalem temple. The office of high priest continued to be passed on by descent within the family of Zadok, who had held office in Solomon's reign. The continuity of office in this family was to be retained down into the time of the second temple, when the Zadokite succession was interrupted about 171 bc. Nevertheless, for all the continuity of religion in Jerusalem, all was not well with religion in Judah, neither during the reign of its first king, Rehoboam, nor during the reigns of his successors. During Rehoboam's reign, there was a decline in religion and also in the priesthood, when popular forms of religion were introduced as a result of foreign influence (1 Kgs 14:22-24). The history of the southern kingdom was marked by periods of religious decline followed by reform, often as a result of the activities of the prophets. The role of the priesthood was all too rarely one of spiritual leadership, and the priests themselves were often the subject of criticism by the prophets (e.g., Jer 2:8, 26).

The northern kingdom, whose first king was Jeroboam I, inevitably had to introduce some radical changes in religion. Jeroboam could not recognize the temple of Jerusalem, partly because it lay outside his state and partly because it was intimately associated with the royal line of David. Jeroboam established two principal shrines in his kingdom, both of which were to retain importance during the relatively short life of the northern kingdom (200 years). The first was at Bethel, in the southern part of his kingdom near the border of Judah (it was only about 12 miles, or 19.3 kilometers* north of Jerusalem). The second shrine, or sanctuary, was at Dan, in the far northern part of his kingdom.

Both these sanctuaries had ancient associations with the Hebrew traditions. Bethel is referred to as early as the time of Abram (Gn 12:8), and the sanctuary at Dan is known from the history of the judges (Judg 18).

There may indeed have been priests and Levites still residing in these two places, descendants of the former servants of the sanctuaries. But Jeroboam established a non-Levitical priesthood to serve in these sanctuaries and in various smaller shrines or "high places," thereby cutting off the religious tradition of the northern state even more radically from that of Judah. The royal sanctuary at Bethel, so close to the Jerusalem temple, may have been set up in deliberate competition with the Judean sanctuary.

The history of the priesthood in the northern kingdom is no more impressive than that of Judah. Many of the prophets, including Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah, condemned the northern sanctuaries and their priests. Hosea was forceful in his condemnation: "As marauders lie in ambush for a man, so do bands of priests; they murder on the road to Shechem, committing shameful crimes" (Hos 6:9, niv). Those to whom the spiritual lives of the chosen people had been entrusted only rarely lived up to their responsibilities.

Priests and Levites during and after the Exile

The northern kingdom came to its end in 722 bc, defeated by the armies of Assyria, but religious life continued in Judah for a while longer. Eventually, the end of the southern state came about 586 bc; the defeat of the state by the Babylonians was accompanied by the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (Lam 2:20). The Babylonian commander took Seraiah, the high priest, and Zephaniah, his assistant, to Riblah, where, along with other officials, they were executed (2 Kgs 25:18-21). Then a policy of exile was established by the Babylonians; the most important and influential people of Judah were deported to Babylon, while the less significant were allowed to remain, for they were unlikely to cause trouble. Of those exiled from Judah, many may have been priests (Jer 29:1), for they were men of influence. By way of contrast, it seems likely that a much smaller number of Levites was exiled, reflecting perhaps their inferior social position.

In the city of Jerusalem there was little normal religious life during the years of the exile; the altar had been destroyed and was not restored until after the exile. No doubt some kind of activity continued, but it was an impoverished form of religion. Most of the priests were in exile in Babylon, but they could not function, for there was no temple or sanctuary. Ezekiel implies that God himself was the only "sanctuary" for the exiles (Ezek 11:16). Not until the return from exile and the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple could the normal functions of priests and Levites resume.

When the Babylonian Empire was defeated, the new Persian conquerors instituted a policy whereby the Hebrew exiles could return to their homeland. Of those returning, 4,289 are designated as priests and members of priestly families, while only 341 were Levites (Ezr 2:36-42); the imbalance probably reflects the imbalance in the number of those exiled initially. Under Joshua (Jeshua), the priest, and Zerubbabel, work began on the restoration. The priests played a significant role in the first year of the return, in the restoration of the altar in Jerusalem, so that sacrifice and worship to God could resume. Once the altar had been restored, the work began on the temple itself in the second year of the return. In this work, both the priests and the Levites were involved, and the laying of new foundations for the temple began. When the foundation had been laid, both priests, in their vestments, and Levites, in their role as singers and musicians, participated in the ceremony of dedication (3:8-13). Again, when the temple had been rebuilt, both priests and Levites participated in the ceremony of dedication (6:16-18). The restoration, however, was concerned with more than buildings; it also involved a moral and religious component. Though priests and Levites helped in this task, they were also affected by it. Many, for example, had married foreign wives (9:1), and thus had to conform to Ezra's reform laws.

To some extent, the priests and Levites resumed their normal duties in the worship of the postexilic period. The priests were engaged in the conduct of the temple worship. The Levites assisted, as temple servants (Neh 11:3), as treasurers and collectors of tithes (10:37-39), and as instructors or teachers of the law of God (8:7-9). Nevertheless, the history of the priesthood after the exile is not free of blemish. Condemnation of the abuses of the priestly office was delivered by the prophet Malachi (Mal 1:6-2:9). Malachi catalogues a list of priestly evils reminiscent of the evil priests who lived during the time of the monarchy.

The office of high priest continued after the exile among the descendants of Zadok, being held first by Joshua (Hg 1:1). The different political circumstances, however, changed the nature of the high priestly office. Whereas in the days of the monarchy the high priest was subservient to the king, there was no king, in the proper sense, after the exile. From a political perspective, the Jews were members of a province or colony; for practical purposes, they were a community based upon a common religion. The high priest was no longer subject to the secular authority of a Jewish king, but his religious authority was considerable, and in some ways his functions were similar to those of a king in preexilic times.

The Priesthood in the Maccabean Period

During the second century bc, some changes took place in the priesthood, particularly with respect to the office of high priest, which marked the end of the OT era and set the background for the NT period. Judea, in the second century, was ruled by the Seleucid kings, who had inherited a portion of the massive Greek Empire established by Alexander the Great. The Judean province was controlled internally under the high priesthood, whose authority was received from the Seleucid kings.

For the first three decades of the second century bc, the high priesthood remained with the Zadokite line of descent. The high priests were members of the (Zadokite) Oniad family: first, Onias III (198-174 bc); then Jason, brother of Onias III (174-171 bc). It was in the period of Jason that there began a series of events that would terminate the Zadokite tradition.

Onias III had opposed the Hellenization policy of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), which threatened to undermine the Jewish faith. Antiochus replaced Onias by Jason, who in effect purchased the high priesthood from the Seleucid king. In purchasing the priestly office, Jason had set a dangerous precedent; although he was of Zadokite descent, his act implied that the office could be bought and that descent was not vital. The opponents of Jason, the Tobiads, were able to remove him from office and have their own candidate, Menelaus (who was not a Zadokite), appointed in his place. This act resulted in a civil war between those supporting Jason and those supporting Menelaus, and the war in turn culminated in ruthless repressive measures by Antiochus Epiphanes; there were massacres in Jerusalem, and the temple was desecrated (167 bc). The desecration of the temple led to the Maccabean revolt, as a result of which the Jews regained their independence for a short time. Menelaus retained the office of high priest until 161 bc and was succeeded by Alcimus (161-159 bc).

There then followed a period during which there was no high priest for seven years. The political climate, however, was such that it became unlikely that the Zadokite line would ever regain the high priesthood, which had been established in the time of King Solomon. The Maccabean Jonathan gained control of Jerusalem, and in 152 bc, with the approval of the Seleucid king, he was formally invested with the high priest's robes of office. He was succeeded as high priest and ruler by his brother Simon in 143 bc, who also held the office with the

approval of the Seleucids (Demetrius II). But in the third year of his reign (140 bc), the high priesthood of Simon received public approval in a great religious assembly, and the family of Simon became "high priest forever" (1 Macc 14:41-47). That event marked the real termination of the Zadokite tradition and the foundation of the Hasmonean line.

The establishment of the high priestly office outside the Zadokite line did not go without challenge. It is probable that a sect within Judaism, now known as the Essenes, was born in reaction to the high priesthood of Simon. The Essenes (better known for the Dead Sea Scrolls) appear to have been founded by a Zadokite priest who rejected the authenticity and authority of Simon. Thus, in a limited sense, the Zadokite priests continued to survive.

The Priesthood in New Testament Times

In the early NT period, both priests and Levites continued to function within the Jewish religion. Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, was a priest belonging to the division of Abijah (Lk 1:5), and his wife was also of priestly descent. When Zechariah was visited by an angel, he was engaged at the time in priestly duties in the Jerusalem temple—various divisions of priests took responsibility for the temple services for a period of time and then returned to their homes (v 23), as another division took over. The distinction between priests and Levites is also maintained in the NT (Jn 1:19) and appears in Jesus' parable concerning the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:31-32). Both priests and Levites were among the earliest converts to Christianity; Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus (Acts 4:36), and several priests responded to the proclamation of the gospel (6:7).

The office of high priest is frequently referred to in the NT. Several high priests are named, the plurality of current and former holders of the office reflecting the nature of the position as an essentially political appointment (as distinct from its oldest definition, that of an office passing from father to son on the death of the father). The two most significant high priests in the NT are those who held office during the lifetime of Jesus. Annas was high priest about ad 6 to 15, but even after he ceased to hold the office formally, he continued to exert considerable influence through his son-in-law, the high priest Caiaphas (c. ad 18-36). Both were significant figures in the trial of Jesus. At a later date, Ananias, son of Nedebaeus, was high priest (c. ad 47-58) and president of the Sanhedrin during the time in which Paul was brought to trial.

The priesthood held considerable authority in NT times. Most internal and religious matters in the Roman province of Judea were within the authority of the Sanhedrin, which functioned as a kind of provincial government, though its powers were limited in certain matters by Rome. Its membership included the ruling and former high priests and a large number of Sadducees, many of whom belonged to influential priestly families. This priestly influence in the Sanhedrin was indicative of the important role of the temple in Jewish life during the first century ad.

In ad 70, following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, a radical change came about in the significance of the priesthood in Judaism. The end of the temple removed in effect the purpose for the existence of the priesthood. Although the priesthood continued after a fashion until the Bar-Kochba rebellion in ad 135, its days were numbered after ad 70. Since the end of the first century ad, Judaism has developed without priests, and its course down to the present century has been charted by the rabbis, the spiritual descendants of the Pharisees.

LEVITE

The Levites were the servants, or ministers, in the Israelite religious system. They were descended from the third son of Jacob and formed one of the tribes of Israel ([Gen 29:31-34](#); see [Levi](#)). The Levites were divided into three sections that corresponded to the three families descended from Levi's three sons, Gershon, Kohath and Merari ([Exod 6:16](#); [Num 3:14-20](#)). God appointed them to their privileged religious service as a reward for their zeal against idolatry ([Exod 32:26-29](#); [Deut 33:8-10](#)).

Although the Levites had general duties in the tabernacle and temple ceremonies, only those of one family within the tribe, the family of Aaron, were priests ([Exod 6:16-25](#); [29:9](#)). Priests alone carried out the blood rituals of the sacrifices, and priests alone entered the inner shrine of the tabernacle (or later the temple) ([Num 3:5-10](#); see [Priest](#)).

Duties concerning the tabernacle

After helping to construct the tabernacle ([Exod 38:21](#)), the Levites had the duty of setting up, taking down, maintaining and transporting the tabernacle on the journey to Canaan ([Num 1:50-51](#)). The Gershon group looked after the curtains and other hangings, and had two wagons to carry their load ([Num 3:21-26](#); [7:7](#)). The Merari group had care of all the timber and metal parts, and had four wagons to carry their load ([Num 3:33-37](#); [7:8](#)). The Kohath group looked after the sacred furniture, most of which they carried on shoulder poles ([Num 3:27-32](#); [7:9](#); [1 Chron 15:14-15](#)).

On the journey the Levites travelled in the centre of the procession ([Num 2:17](#)). When a camp was set up, they camped immediately around the tabernacle ([Num 1:52-53](#); [3:23,29,35,38](#)).

Representatives of the people

Since God had saved the Israelites' firstborn through the Passover judgment, all their firstborn belonged in a special sense to God. For the service of the tabernacle, however, God used the Levites instead of the firstborn ([Num 3:11-13,40-51](#)).

In a dedication ceremony involving cleansing rituals and sacrificial offerings, Moses and Aaron presented the Levites to God for his service ([Num 8:5-13](#)). God then gave the Levites back to Aaron to help him and the other priests in their work ([Num 8:14-19](#)). Leaders of the people also took part in the ceremony, to indicate symbolically that the Levites were the people's representatives ([Num 8:9-10](#)).

Levites began their service at the age of thirty, though this was apparently preceded by a training period of five years. They ceased their main duties at the age of fifty, but were still able to help in various ways ([Num 4:3](#); [8:23-26](#)). Having no time to earn a living as others, the Levites received their income in the form of tithes offered by the people ([Num 18:21-28](#); see [Tithes](#)).

Although Levi had no tribal area of its own, Joshua gave the Levites cities in each of the other tribes. The number of cities in each tribe was in proportion to the size of the tribe ([Num 35:1-8](#); [Josh 21:1-3](#)). There were forty-eight Levitical cities and these were divided among four groups—the priestly Kohathites (Aaron was a Kohathite; [Exod 6:16-20](#)), the non-priestly Kohathites, the Gershonites, and the Merarites. The cities for the priestly group were all within easy reach of Jerusalem, where the temple was later built ([Josh 21:4-8](#)). Among the forty-eight cities were six cities of refuge ([Josh 20:1-9](#); see [City of Refuge](#)).

Temple service

In arranging the functions for priests and Levites in Israel's temple services, David divided the Levitical singers and musicians into the usual three family groups. The respective leaders were Heman, Asaph and Ethan (Jeduthan), all of whom are mentioned as writers of psalms ([1 Chron 6:1,31-48](#); [15:16-22](#); [2 Chron 5:12](#); [Ps 73-83](#); [88](#); [89](#)).

Other duties of Levites included cleaning the temple ([1 Chron 23:28](#)), helping the priests in the temple rituals ([1 Chron 23:28-32](#)), serving as temple guards ([1 Chron 9:17-27](#)) and looking after the furniture, food and spices used in the ceremonies ([1 Chron 9:28-32](#)). Some of the Levites served as judges and officials of various kinds ([1 Chron 23:4](#); [26:20](#)).

When David found that there were too many Levites for the amount of work available, he divided them into twenty-four groups according to their family descent. The groups served in rotation one week every six months, though all groups were on duty for the annual festivals (thereby making up the remaining four weeks of the year) ([1 Chron 23:1-24](#); [24:18-19](#); [25:9-31](#); [26:1,12](#)).

Errors, reforms and developments

Over the following centuries, the nation and many of its kings frequently fell into idolatry. Priests and Levites usually played an important part in the reforms that godly kings carried out ([2 Chron 17:7-9](#); [19:8-11](#); [29:1-16](#); [30:21-22](#); [34:8-13](#)), though at times they were slow to respond to the king's directions ([2 Chron 24:4-13](#)). A feature of some of the reforms was the organization of temple duties for priests and Levites according to David's original plan ([2 Chron 29:25-30](#); [31:2-19](#); [35:1-15](#)).

When, after seventy years captivity in Babylon, the Jews were released, many Levites were among those who returned to Jerusalem ([Ezra 2:40-42](#)). They supervised the reconstruction of the temple and participated in ceremonies connected with the building's beginning and completion ([Ezra 3:8-11](#); [6:16](#)). At first they were properly organized for religious service ([Ezra 6:18](#)), but later they were neglected by those who should have supported them with their tithes. Nehemiah corrected this problem by organizing an orderly system of tithing ([Neh 10:37](#); [11:3](#); [12:27,47](#)).

Another result of Nehemiah's reforms was increased activity in teaching the law. The Levites helped the priests and scribes in this work ([Neh 8:7-9](#)), but the good work of these early leaders was not maintained by those of later generations. The result was the development of that form of Jewish religion known in New Testament times as Judaism (see [Scribe](#); [Synagogue](#)). Nevertheless, people of New Testament times still saw Levites as a class of people distinct from both the priests and the scribes ([Luke 10:25,31-32](#); [John 1:19](#); [Acts 4:36](#)).

PRIESTS

Personnel in charge of sacrifice and offering at worship places, particularly the tabernacle and temple.

Functions Priesthood in the OT primarily involved sacrificing at the altar and worship in the shrine. Other functions were blessing the people ([Num. 6:22-26](#)), determining the will of God ([Exod. 28:30](#)), and instructing the people in the law of God ([Deut. 31:9-12](#)). This instruction included the application of the laws of cleanness ([Lev. 11-15](#)). Some of these functions, like blessing and teaching, would not be reserved for priests alone, but sacrificing and the use of the Urim and Thummim were theirs exclusively.

If the main characteristic of priesthood was sacrificing, the office is as old as Abel. Noah sacrificed and so did Abraham and the patriarchs. We may say that they were family priests. Jethro, the priest of Midian, brought sacrifices to God and worshiped with Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel ([Exod. 18:12](#)). God promised that

Israel, if it were faithful, would be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” ([Exod. 19:6](#)). This may have meant that Israel was called to mediate God’s word and work to the world—to be a light to the nations ([Isa. 42:6](#)).

Later, when God purposed to establish the nation, He chose Moses to organize the army, to set up a system of judges, to build a house of worship, and to ordain priests to serve therein. The formal priesthood goes with the formal worship of an organized nation of considerable size. On Mount Sinai God gave Moses instructions to build the tabernacle. On the mount God told Moses to appoint Aaron and his four sons to serve as priests, that is, to serve at the altar and in the sanctuary ([Exod. 28:1,41](#)). Their holy garments are prescribed in detail, and their consecration ritual is given in chapters 28-29. As to the work of these priests, most of Leviticus and some of Numbers and Deuteronomy give details. Aaron and his descendants of the tribe of Levi served in the tabernacle and temple as priests. Members of the tribe of Levi not related to Aaron assisted the priests but did not offer sacrifices. Priests were supported by offerings, and Levites were supported by tithes ([Num. 18:20-24](#)). See [Aaron](#); [High Priest](#); [Levites](#); [Urim and Thummim](#).

R. Laird Harris

Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary.

PRIEST

In ancient religions, priests were mediators between the people and their gods. They were religious officials whose duty was to pass on the instructions of the gods to the people and offer the people's sacrifices to the gods ([Gen 41:45](#); [47:22](#); [Exod 2:16](#); [18:1](#); [2 Kings 11:18](#); [Acts 14:13](#)).

The earliest priest of the one true God that the Bible mentions is Melchizedek. He was God's representative to whom Abraham offered gifts, and man's representative through whom Abraham drew near to God ([Gen 14:17-24](#)). Such priests were rare, as God had not yet given mankind an organized religious system. Among the ancestors of Israel, the head of the family usually acted as the family priest ([Gen 8:20](#); [22:13](#); [31:54](#); [46:1](#)). Before Israel was formally established as God's people by covenant, Moses served as the nation's priest ([Exod 3:13-15,18](#); [24:2,6,8,12](#)).

Aaronic (or Levitical) priesthood

At the establishment of Israel's religious system, Aaron and his sons were the priests, Aaron being set apart as the high priest. In the generations that followed, only male descendants of Aaron could be priests. Those who belonged to the same tribe as Aaron (the tribe of Levi), but who were not of Aaron's family, were responsible for many of the practical aspects of Israel's religious affairs, but they were not priests ([Exod 6:16-25](#); [32:25-29](#); [Num 3:2-3](#); [3:9-10](#); see [Levites](#)).

Priests mediated between the people and God. They presented the people's sacrifices to God ([Heb 8:3](#); see [Sacrifice](#)), and passed on God's instruction to the people ([Mal 2:7](#)). They were to be the teachers and moral guides of the nation ([Deut 27:9-10](#); [31:9-13](#); [33:10](#)). They also carried out daily functions in relation to the altar in the tabernacle courtyard ([Lev 6:12,14](#)) and the altar and lamp inside the Holy Place ([Exod 27:20-21](#); [30:7-8](#)). Only priests could enter the Holy Place, and only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place. Even then he could do so only once a year, on the Day of Atonement ([Lev 16:2-3](#); [Heb 9:6-7](#); see [Day of Atonement](#)).

Representative functions

As religious officials representing the people, priests wore clothing that set them apart from others. An ordinary priest's clothing was fairly plain, consisting of a full-length long-sleeved white coat and a white cap ([Exod 28:40-43](#)). The high priest's clothing, by contrast, was both distinctive and colourful.

Although the high priest wore a white coat similar to that of the ordinary priests ([Exod 28:39](#)), it was largely hidden from view because of a blue robe that he wore over it ([Exod 28:31-35](#)). Over the blue robe was a multicoloured garment called an ephod, which was the most prominent garment of the high priest's dress ([Exod 28:5-14](#); see [Ephod](#)). Tied to the ephod was a flat pouch called the breastpiece, inside which were the Urim and Thummim ([Exod 28:15-30](#); see [Urim and Thummim](#)). On his head the high priest wore a turban with a gold plate declaring 'holiness to the Lord' ([Exod 28:36-39](#)).

The high priest's dress was intended to display dignity and splendour ([Exod 28:2](#)). It also showed symbolically that the high priest acted not as an individual but as the representative of the whole nation. He had the names of the tribes of Israel engraved on stones on the breastpiece and on stones on his shoulder pieces, so that when he went into the presence of God he symbolically took the people with him ([Exod 28:9-12,21,29](#)).

High Priest

Before the priests could begin their service, they were appointed to their position in an elaborate dedication ceremony. Since they themselves were not free from sin, they had to offer sacrifices for themselves before they

could act on behalf of others ([Exod 29:1-37](#); cf. [Heb 7:27](#)). Because they were aware of their own need for forgiveness, the priests should have had a sympathetic understanding of the weaknesses of the people on whose behalf they ministered ([Heb. 5:1-3](#)).

Priests were to maintain disciplined behaviour, moral uprightness and ceremonial cleanliness ([Lev 10:8-11](#); [21:1-8,13-14](#); [22:1-9](#)). Any priests who had physical defects could not carry out representative functions for the people, though they could share in less public priestly activity ([Lev 21:16-24](#)).

The people provided the income of those who did religious work on their behalf. They gave a tithe (i.e. a tenth) of their own income to the Levites, and the Levites in turn gave a tenth to the priests ([Num 18:25-28](#); see [Tithes](#)). The priests received further income from portions of sacrifices, animal firstlings and harvest firstfruits that were allotted to them. This income helped compensate for the priests' lack of tribal or family land ([Num 5:9-10](#); [18:8-20](#); [Deut 18:1-5](#); [26:1-4](#)).

Other responsibilities

One of the priests' duties was to ensure that people maintained a high level of cleanliness, whether in matters of ceremonial holiness, physical health or personal hygiene ([Lev 13:3,10,20,30](#); [14:2-3,36,48](#); [15:13-15,28-30](#); [Matt 8:4](#); see [Uncleaness](#)). Priests also supervised the keeping of vows ([Lev 27:1-25](#); [Num 6:6-12](#); see [Vows](#)) and assisted civil officials in giving judgments in certain moral issues ([Num 5:11-31](#); [Deut 17:8-13](#); [19:15-21](#); [21:1-9](#)). They had ceremonial and practical functions in national affairs such as mobilization for war, land allocation and public celebrations ([Num 10:1-10](#); [Josh 3:14-17](#); [14:1](#); [19:51](#); [1 Chron 15:24](#); [2 Chron 13:12](#)).

By the time of David there were too many priests for the amount of work to be done. David therefore divided the priests (and the Levites) into twenty-four sections, each of whom served for one week every six months ([1 Chron 24:1-6](#); [Luke 1:8](#)). The remaining four weeks of the year were taken up with the annual festivals, which all males were to attend and which therefore required all priests to be on duty ([Exod 23:14-17](#)).

Changing role of the priests

Throughout Israel's history there were both good and bad priests. Many were zealous for righteousness and had a good influence on national leaders and the people as a whole ([Num 25:1-13](#); [2 Sam 15:27](#); [1 Kings 1:8](#); [2 Kings 12:2](#); [2 Chron 11:13-17](#); [Ezra 5:1-2](#); [Neh 8:1-9](#); see [Ezra](#); [Jehoiada](#); [Joshua the son of Jehozadak](#); [Phinehas](#); [Zadok](#)).

Some of the nation's better kings gave priests important leadership responsibilities in an effort to reform the nation and administer it according to God's law ([2 Chron 17:7-9](#); [19:8-11](#); [29:3-4,11](#); [31:2-5](#); [34:8-9,20-21](#); [35:1-6](#); see [Chronicles, Books of](#)). Other priests, however, were rebellious, corrupt, immoral and idolatrous. They were among the chief causes of the nation's ultimate destruction ([Lev 10:1-2](#); [1 Sam 2:12-17](#); [3:10-14](#); [2 Kings 16:11-16](#); [Isa 28:7](#); [Jer 2:8](#); [6:13-15](#); [Ezek 22:26](#); [Hosea 6:9](#); [Micah 3:11](#); [Zeph 3:3-4](#); [Mal 2:7-8](#)).

After the captivity in Babylon, the Jews moved back to their homeland and rebuilt the nation. By this time a new emphasis had developed on teaching the law of Moses, and a new group of teachers had become prominent in Israel. These were known as scribes, or teachers of the law (see [Scribes](#)). As the years passed, the priests became more concerned with exercising political power, though they still carried out ceremonial functions ([Luke 1:8](#); [5:14](#)).

By New Testament times two major religious parties dominated Jewish affairs. The scribes were the main influence in the more traditionally religious party, the Pharisees, but the chief priests controlled the politically dominant party, the Sadducees ([Acts 5:17](#); see [Sadducees](#)). All these people, whether priests or scribes,

Sadducees or Pharisees, readily cooperated to get rid of Jesus ([Matt 21:15,45-46](#); [22:15,23](#); [26:57](#); [27:41](#); [Mark 11:18](#); [John 11:57](#)).

High priesthood of Jesus

The writer of the book of Hebrews pictures the life, death and present ministry of Jesus as that of a great high priest. Jesus' high priesthood, however, belongs not to the order of Aaron (for Jesus was not a descendant of Aaron) but to the order of Melchizedek. This was a higher priesthood than Aaron's, for it was not limited to one era, one nation, one family or one class of people. Christ's priesthood is therefore timeless and is available to all mankind ([Heb 7:1-3,11-17,23-25](#)).

Although Christ did not belong to the Aaronic priesthood, his priestly work followed the pattern of the Aaronic priesthood. Yet it was far superior, for it achieved perfectly what the Aaronic priesthood merely pictured. Like the Aaronic priests, Christ was appointed to his position by God. He also had a sympathetic understanding of the problems of those whom he represented before God. But, unlike the Aaronic priests, he was without sin and so had no need to offer sacrifices for his own sins before acting on behalf of others ([Heb 2:17-18](#); [4:15-16](#); [5:1-6](#); [7:26-28](#)).

Aaronic priests offered sacrifices repeatedly, but the sacrifices could never make people perfect, because they could never take away sins. Christ offered *himself* as a sacrifice. By that one act he completed his sacrificial work and brought perfect cleansing to all believers ([Heb 10:1-4,11-14](#)). The Aaronic high priest could enter the Most Holy Place (God's symbolic dwelling place) only once a year, and then only by taking with him the blood of a sacrificial animal. Christ, through his own blood, entered the actual presence of God and secured an eternal salvation ([Heb 8:1-2](#); [9:6-14,24-26](#)).

Because Christ is in God's presence as their heavenly representative, Christians can now enter God's presence. They need no earthly priest to mediate on their behalf. Through Christ they can come to God directly and confidently, knowing that they can depend on Christ's help in pleading for their needs before God ([Heb 4:14-16](#); [7:25](#); [9:24](#); [10:19-22](#); [Rom 8:34](#); [1 John 2:1](#); see [Advocate](#)).

Christians have added confidence in Christ's concern for them when they see the prayer that he prayed for his disciples shortly before his crucifixion ([John 17:9-26](#)). Furthermore, they know that Christ's personal entrance into the presence of God is the guarantee that one day they too will personally enter the presence of God, and find there an eternal dwelling place ([Heb 6:19-20](#)).

All God's people are priests

Although Israel's religious system had an appointed order of priests, there was a sense (not specifically connected with the religious system) in which all the people were priests. Israel, as the chosen people of God, was a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. The people of Israel were to serve God, both by bringing him worship and by being his representatives in making him known to other nations ([Exod. 19:5-6](#); [Isa 61:6](#)).

The words recorded in [Exodus 19:5-6](#) applied to the Old Testament people of God, but in the New Testament the same words are applied to the new people of God, the Christian church. Christ's people are now God's chosen race, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation ([1 Peter 2:9-10](#); cf. [Rev 1:6](#); [5:9-10](#)). They serve God by bringing him the sacrifice of worship and praise ([1 Peter 2:5](#); cf. [Heb 13:15](#)) and by making him known to the nations of the world ([1 Peter 2:9](#); cf. [Rom 15:16](#)).

The AMG Concise Bible Dictionary.

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 ([Gen 12:7](#); [Gen 13:4](#)), Isaac ([Gen 26:25](#)), Jacob ([Gen 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 ([Ex 29:1-37](#)).

Their duties were manifold ([Ex 27:20, 21](#); [Ex 29:38-44](#); [Lev 6:12](#); [Lev 10:11](#); [Lev 24:8](#); [Num 10:1-10](#); [Deut 17:8-13](#); [Deut 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 ([1Ch 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 ([1Pe 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. *that's the*

Illustrated Bible Dictionary: And Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature.