

Biblical Concepts of Priesthood

This short paper reviews (non exhaustively) the Old Testament background to priesthood from Melchizedek to Aaron and the Levitical priests. It then looks at how these ideas are developed in the New Testament in the concept of Jesus as our high priest and priesthood in the church.

Old Testament Background

Melchizedek Gen 14:18-20

The enigmatic Melchizedek ('king of righteousness') is the first person in the Bible to be given the title 'priest'. He was king of Salem ('king of peace', king of Jerusalem) and 'priest of God Most High'. He came out to meet Abraham as he was about to meet the king of Sodom after the defeat of the kings of Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Bela. He brought bread and wine and blessed Abraham, who in turn gave him a tithe (tenth) of the battle spoils.

The writer to the Hebrews (Heb 7) adds that Melchizedek was 'without father and mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest for ever'.

Melchizedek is a type of Christ. He was both priest and king, his name and office represent righteousness and peace and in the bringing of bread and wine most obviously prefigures Jesus. In the messianic Psalm 110, David (himself king but not priest - he is from Judah not Levi) prophesies about Jesus, 'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek'.

Jethro Ex 2:16-22, 18:1-27

Jethro, Moses father-in-law, is the second person given the title 'priest' (except for pagan priests of Egypt). He was 'priest of Midian' and also had the name Reuel, which means 'friend of God'. Moses stayed with him and married Zipporah, his daughter, after he had had to flee Egypt (Ex 2:15).

After Moses had led Israel from Egypt, Jethro came to him in the desert (Ex 18:5) with Zipporah (whom Moses had sent home to her father, presumably for safety) and her two sons. Jethro was delighted (Ex 18:9) to hear what God had done and gave praise to God (v10). Jethro's trust in God was confirmed by what he heard (v11).

Jethro observed his son-in-law in action and realised that he was doing too much, deciding everything that was brought to him. Jethro's wise advise saved Moses from a nervous breakdown or at least from severe exhaustion (v18).

Kingdom of Priests Ex 19:6

Israel was called out, set apart to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (1 Pet 1:9) to fulfil the promise to Abraham that through his seed all nations of the earth would be blessed and to intercede for the nations.

Young men acted as priests Ex 19:22, 24:5

Before the priesthood was instituted in Israel, it appears that some young men acted as priests, although it is not stated exactly what this means.

Aaron and his sons Ex 28:1-3, 29:1-37, 30:22-33 (Ps 133:2), 39:1-31, Lev 2:2, 3:2, 6:9, 24, 7:34 9:1-24, Num 18:1-11, Dt 31:9-13

As part of the instructions Moses received on Mount Sinai, God told him to 'have Aaron your brother brought out from among the Israelites, with his sons...., so that they may serve me as priests' (Ex 28:1). Instructions were given about the garments that were to be made for them to wear in performing their duties (Ex 28:2-43) and about the ritual for their consecration which involved a complicated set of sacrifices (Ex29:1-37) and anointing with special oil (Ex 30:22-30, Ps 133:2). The priests were to be so holy that whatever touched them would also be holy (Ex 30:29).

The system of sacrifices given in the law on Mount Sinai was mediated by Aaron and his sons- for each of the offerings the people are told 'take it to Aaron's sons, the priests' for them to actually do the offering (Lev 2:2, etc). No-one else was allowed in the holy place to perform the sacrifice (Num 18:4,7). Numbers 18:1f describes the duties of the priests:

- * to 'minister before the Tent of Testimony (aided by other Levites)
- * to take responsibility for everyone's actions in or near the Tent
- * to care for the sanctuary and the altar
- * to take charge of the offerings

The Priests were allowed to take certain parts of the offerings for themselves and their families (Num 18:9f) and anyone within the family who was ceremonially clean could eat of it.

Finally, they also had responsibility for God's word, to remind the people of God's law, particularly in the year for cancelling debts at the feast of Tabernacles (Dt 31:10-11).

Nadab and Abihu Lev 10:1-7

The priestly duties were well defined and in the events of this chapter we see the results of over-enthusiasm. In this case, Aaron's two sons Nadab and Abihu 'offered unauthorised fire before the Lord', in other words they acted on their own initiative and not in obedience to the Lord's command. In the previous chapter, they had seen the miracle of the Lord 'answering by fire' at the beginning of their (and Aaron and their two other brothers') ministry. They probably thought that the fire that came from the presence of the Lord had something to do with them and that they could 'call God up' at will. This is the spirit of witchcraft.

Levitical Blessing Numbers 6:24-27

This is an instruction to Aaron and his sons, and by definition to the whole Levitical priesthood, about how they were to bless the Israelites. The first part is an invocation of the Lord's protection and provision ('keep you'). The second is to do with the Lord's favour (see Prov 16:15) and presence - the joy on God's face and his grace to us in giving good things to us that we don't deserve, in particular his presence. The third is to do with the Lord's acceptance turning his face towards us and giving us the peace that comes from knowing we are accepted.

God says that when the priests do this they "will put my name on the Israelites and I will bless them". Since the name of the Lord speaks of his nature (holiness, glory, etc) I take this to be the OT equivalent of the NT promise of sanctification - a gift of grace.

New Testament development

In the gospels and Acts, the priesthood is essentially the OT one. It is in the epistles that a new order is spelled out.

The letter to the Hebrews

Many of the ideas about priesthood in the New Testament are found in the letter to the Hebrews. This is not surprising since these ideas are based on the Hebraic priesthood rather than on any pagan ideas. The letter to the Hebrews makes the following points:

1. We have a high priest who can sympathise with us (Heb 4:14-5:3)

Jesus has 'gone through the heavens' or 'gone into heaven' in the same way as the high priest went into the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and later, the temple. He is the 'high priest' which implies a priesthood under him. This high priest was tempted (Matt 4:1-11 - see the Appendix below) in all the ways we are tempted but overcame temptation without sinning. He is therefore able to understand what we go through and to sympathise with us in our weakness. Because of this, we can approach 'the throne of grace' or mercy seat with confidence, knowing that he will not reject us or condemn us.

For the same reason he is able to exercise his priestly office representing men to God and offering sacrifices to God on their behalf with sympathy. He deals gently with sinful, weak men because he himself was subject to weakness (albeit without giving in to that weakness and sinning). Human high priest, of course, are also subject to this same weakness and give in to it the same as everyone else. They, therefore, have to offer sacrifices to atone for their own sin as well as the sins of the people. Only in this last respect is Jesus different from human high priests.

2. Jesus, a high priest called by God, a priest in the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:4-10)

No priest can appoint himself but has to be called by God. This was true of Aaron and the all the priests of the order of Levi that came after him. It is also true for priests of the order of Melchizedek (priests and kings, a royal priesthood), including Jesus. Jesus was designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. He could not be a Jewish priest otherwise because he came from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. He was God's Son and therefore a king (v5). He exercised the priestly duty of representing man to God through prayer (v7) and became the source of salvation (not just the intermediary) because of what he suffered.

3. The Order of Melchizedek compared with the Order of Levi (Heb 6:19 - 7:28)

Melchizedek, 'king of righteousness' was 'king of Salem' (king of peace, king of Jerusalem) and also 'priest of God Most High'. As such he was the forerunner of all kingly priests, all royal priesthoods. He was a type of Christ. He was greater than Abraham because Abraham gave him a tithe. Because Levi was descended from Abraham, Melchizedek was also greater than Levi and hence his priesthood greater than that of Levi (Aaron).

Jesus is like Melchizedek in that he is 'without beginning of life or end of days' (7:3). A change of priesthood was necessary because of a change in the law. The ceremonial law of the old covenant passed away when the perfect sacrifice of Jesus made it obsolete. The new covenant in one way goes back to an earlier covenant based on 'the power of an indestructible life' (7:16) not on regulations. The ceremonial law had no power to bring the change in us that was necessary for us to come to God (7:18, Rom 8:3,4). The Levitical priesthood carried on so long as there were replacements, since the priests grew old and died. Jesus, on the other hand, remains a priest for ever like Melchizedek - he is a permanent priest (7:24).

Again, like Melchizedek ('king of righteousness'), Jesus is holy, blameless, set apart from sinners (7:26). This is not to say that Melchizedek was sinless but his name foretells Jesus' sinlessness. Jesus' priesthood surpasses the Levitical priesthood because he does not need to offer sacrifices for his own sins and neither does he need to carry on offering sacrifices - his one sacrifice is complete,

for all time, for everyone, for every sin (7:27). Priests of the order of Levi are weak men, subject to sin, failure and death like every other man. The oath by which Jesus is appointed a priest after the order of Melchizedek appoints him, the Son, as an eternal and perfect priest, not subject to sin, failure or death.

4. A high priest of the new covenant (Heb 8:1-13)

Jesus serves at the tabernacle set up by God himself, not at any tabernacle set up by man and sits at the right hand of the Father. This signifies his victory (sitting down) and his status (at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven). He doesn't stand before the altar, he sits at the throne of the King.

The priestly ministry involves offering gifts, and it is the same with Jesus, except that he offered himself. He would not be a priest if he was on earth (and he wasn't a priest when he was on earth - he was from the wrong tribe for a start - and there was a priesthood already in existence). That priesthood serves in a sanctuary that is only a copy or a figure of the true sanctuary where Jesus serves. His ministry is as superior to theirs as the covenant he mediates is superior to the old covenant. The old covenant involves priests making continual sacrifices for their own sins and for the sins of the people - it is never finished. The new covenant on the other hand involves the one perfect, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world.

The old covenant was based on observance of the written law and it is clear that obedience to this law is not possible, it is too hard. Particularly this is so when Jesus' interpretation is taken into account (Matt 5:17-48). The Jews (the Pharisees in particular) tried to 'tie down' the law by adding very specific interpretations about what was and what was not permissible. In so doing, although trying to make it easier to obey (at least to start with), they watered it down and lost the principles (spirit) behind it. Jesus' interpretation widened out this interpretation, making it much less specific, much more all-embracing, more in keeping with the original spirit and impossible to keep. In the new covenant, God steps in, 'writes the laws in our hearts' - that is, makes them part of our being. His life in us keeps the law.

The old covenant was imperfect, that is why a new covenant was necessary. The new covenant replaces the old, making it obsolete. What is obsolete will soon fade away and disappear.

5. The priest is also the sacrifice and his work is complete (Heb 9:11-10:22)

Under the old covenant the high priest was only allowed to enter the Holy of Holies once a year and then only having made elaborate sacrifices to atone for his sins by the blood of calves and goats. Jesus entered THE Holy of Holies once for all, having shed his own blood, not to cover his sins, but ours. 'How much more will the blood of Christ cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death' (v14).

We have an inheritance and like all inheritances this is set down in a will and the will (covenant, testament) only comes into effect after the death of the one that made it. Jesus has died, he has ransomed sinners, done away with sin itself and the will comes into effect.

Every man is destined to die once and then face judgement. In the same way, Jesus died once to take sins away and those who receive this gift will not face judgement. Jesus will come a second time, not to take sin away because he has already done that, but to complete the salvation of those who wait for him.

The old covenant (law) is only a shadow of what is to come and so it can never complete what is necessary, that is it can never make us perfect so that we can come to worship. It is impossible for the blood of animals to cleanse from sin or even to bring relief from guilt. That is why Psalm 40 says that God does not want sacrifice but by obedient service.

This one sacrifice makes us holy, God's laws are written in our hearts and our sins are not remembered any more. No further sacrifice is necessary. His sacrifice gives us confidence to enter the most holy place - he has made a way for us. We can approach the Father with confidence because our hearts have been cleansed from a guilty conscience.

The New Testament has a few more things to say about priesthood in the church:

Sharing the Good News is a priestly duty (Rom 15:16)

The church is a kingdom of priests. Proclaiming the gospel is a priestly duty in that through the gospel the Gentiles are made holy, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

A priestly people (1 Pet 2:4-10, Rev 1:6, 5:10, 20:6)

The church is the fulfilment of the theme of Ex 19:6 - in the church the kingdom of priests, the royal priesthood, the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek has arrived. This chosen people, which wasn't a people at all, replaces the original chosen people who hadn't fulfilled their purpose - to declare God's praises and bring him glory, to reign on earth (The millennial reign of Christ and the church). This priestly people will "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"

It is the people as a whole that constitute the priesthood - no individual is a priest acting on behalf of the rest. It is important to note that ordination by the laying on of hands occurs several times in the New Testament (For servanthood (deacons) - Acts 6:6, for eldership (bishops or overseers) - Titus 1:5, for missionary activity (apostles) - Acts 13:3) but never for priesthood.

General

It is quite clear from the NT that the OT priesthood has passed away and that all the OT system of sacrifices has passed away also because of the one perfect, for-all-time sacrifice of the perfect Lamb of God - Jesus. The OT system of sacrifices was to teach us about what Jesus would do. Once he had finished his work there was no longer any need for the system, the temple or the priesthood.

The OT priesthood was confined to selected members of the tribe of Levi, although other Levites could be pressed into service if necessary (eg Hezekiah's consecration of the temple in 2 Chron.29:34) and their ministry consisted entirely of purification through blood offering, first of themselves and then of the people, and of the offering of various other sacrifices as laid out in the book of Leviticus.

In the NT we have the great high priest, Jesus, priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek (not Levi because Jesus was from the tribe of Judah - the tribe of kings) and the priesthood of all believers whose priesthood consists of bringing others to Christ (1Pet 2:9, Rom 15:16). Our main role is declaring God's wonderful deeds and bringing him praise – our priesthood is the priesthood of Jethro (Exodus 18:1-27)!

In the NT, various ministers are specified whose ministry is to be executed in the church for the equipping of believers (Eph 4) but priests are not on the list. Similarly, Paul talks about the laying on of hands (ordination) for elders and deacons (Acts 6 - servants) but never for priests. This is because all believers are priests already.

Appendix - The temptation of Jesus, our high priest (Matt 4:1-11)

Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus, our high priest, has been tempted in every way as we are but without sinning. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness described in Matthew 4 covers the various ways in which he was tempted although he was almost certainly tempted at other times too. Satan tempted him in 3 ways:

1. 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread'

Jesus has fasted 40 days and was obviously hungry. In tempting him thus, Satan tried to cast doubt on God's provision. Jesus was tempted to abuse his power to supply his own needs rather than relying on his Father's provision for him. Incidentally in all of the temptations, Jesus' relationship with his Father is also questioned.

2. 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down' (from the top of the temple)

Satan tries to cast doubt on God's ways. Jesus was tempted to perform a circus act to convince people of his power rather than doing what God had given him to do. In other places Jesus says quite clearly that he is only authorised to do what he sees the Father doing.

3. 'All this (kingdoms of the world) I will give you if you will bow down and worship me'

Satan tries to cast doubt on God himself, in particular his promise to bring all things under his Son's feet. The temptation is to worship a false god (Satan himself in this case) and to receive a reward from that false god.

These 3 types of temptation are common to us all - to worship false gods, to do things our way rather than God's way and to be self-reliant instead of trusting in God and his love for us. Jesus didn't give in to any of these temptations but, in each case, used the Word of God to defeat Satan. The temptation of Jesus is his first victory over Satan and took place right at the beginning of his ministry. This victory was a necessary prerequisite for Jesus' final victory on the cross (Col 2:15) since he was the 'spotless Lamb of God' as well as the great high priest.

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