

In preparation for the Tabernacle display at Scentsy Commons, the Meridian Idaho North Stake Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints requested that several members of the Stake write research papers on various subjects relating to the ancient Tabernacle revealed to Moses in the Old Testament. The authors of these nine papers are not Bible scholars, but spent significant time, effort, and prayer as they studied their subjects and honed their messages. Their hope was to provide meaningful information for readers of all faiths and backgrounds who want to gain a deeper understanding of the doctrine and symbolism of Jesus Christ surrounding the Tabernacle. The authors' intent was for the writings to be from a Christian perspective, yet free from bias towards any one Christian religion. Further, the facts and opinions represented in these papers are the work of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the doctrine and teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or its leaders.

We welcome your questions or feedback on how we can improve the content of these research papers:
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The Role of Priests and High Priests in the Bible - Executive Summary

By Vince Covino

- The priesthood played an integral role in leading God's people and administering the laws and rites of the gospel.
- Priesthood servants were chosen by God, through their lineage, and based upon worthiness.
- Because of their sinful state, the Patriarchal Priesthood was taken from Israel.
 - The Aaronic (Levitical) Priesthood continued, to help Israel repent and return to Jehovah.
 - New rites and rituals were given in connection with the Law of Moses.
- The Law of Moses, as practiced in the Old Testament, functioned within the authority of the Aaronic Priesthood.
 - Duties of Levites included assisting priests, serving as porters, gatekeepers, treasurers, and in dismantling and setting up the tabernacle.
 - Levites were required to be male descendants of the tribe of Levi.
 - Levites were consecrated through rituals and supported by the tithes of the people.
 - Duties of priests included assisting high priests, caring for the lamp, the shewbread, the altars, and in blessing and teaching the congregation.
 - Priests were male Levites who descended from Aaron.
 - Priests were washed, anointed and clothed in preparation for their service.
 - Duties of the high priest included presiding, overseeing all sacrifices, and making atonement for himself and for the camp of Israel.
 - The high priest offered special sacrifices and entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement on behalf of Israel.
 - Only the high priest could offer the sacrifices for the sins of the priests, the people, or himself.
- The fulfilling of the Law of Moses by the Lamb of God brought about an end to priestly duties pertaining to the law of Moses.
 - The old covenant (the law of Moses), was preparatory and temporary.
 - The new covenant is Christ's higher law.
- Jesus Christ is our great High Priest.
 - As High Priest, and as the Lamb of God, Jesus offered Himself a sacrifice for sin.
 - Jesus has entered into heaven to prepare the way for those who accept His offering to also enter into the presence of God.

The Role of Priests and High Priests in Biblical Times

By Vince Covino

Priesthood holders held an essential role in ministering to God's people. Those who served in the priesthood were chosen by God, with essential duties and performances directed through His holy prophets. Understanding the duties and ordinances performed by priests and their relationship to God and His covenant people, help us to more deeply appreciate the significance of covenants. Subsequently, we come to a better understanding of our Great High Priest and Mediator of the new covenant, Jesus Christ.

The Lord endowed His people with power to become his servants and ministers. Aaron and his sons were washed, clothed, and anointed, as the Lord taught Moses, "that they may minister unto me in the priest's office: for their anointing shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations" (see Ex. 40:12-15). The laws, symbols, and ordinances presented through priesthood service made manifest the powers of godliness to His children on the earth. Moses in his day, and likewise Paul in his day taught these truths most plainly; notwithstanding their followers were often slow to claim the blessings made available by the Lord through the priesthood.

Priesthood Servants Chosen by God

The Lord called and chose those who would minister as His priesthood servants. He said to Israel, "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). While the Melchizedek priesthood is "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life," the Levitical priesthood was "with father, with mother, and with descent" (Heb. 7:3). Thus, in Old Testament times of the Levitical priesthood, ministers were determined through lineage and birth order, which was determined by God (see Acts 17:26).

The story of 250 Reubenites approaching Moses as they campaigned for priestly callings (see Num. 16) reminds us that it is not mortals, not even Moses the great prophet, who called men to the priesthood. Moses, in the meekness that earned him the reputation of the "meekest of all men on the earth" (Num. 12:3), taught these aspiring Israelites how appointments to the priesthood were made, when he said to them, "the Lord will shew who are his, and who is holy, and will cause him to come near unto him: even him whom he hath chosen will he cause to come near unto him" (Num. 16:5). Then, speaking to the Levites, who had been called of God, Moses taught, "the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the Lord...to minister unto them" (Num. 16:9). The Lord's authorized messenger, Moses, learned by revelation that it was God's will that Aaron serve in his priestly role (see Ex. 28:1). Accordingly, Moses called and consecrated him (Ex. 40:12-16; Lev. 8:9-13; see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Moses setting Aaron apart as high priest by the laying on of hands.

Holding the priesthood was an honor to which a relatively select few were called. The Lord said to His ancient disciples, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you” (John 15:16). There was never a right to act in priestly roles without the call from God through his servants, the prophets. “For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins...And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron” (Heb. 5:1, 4). Even Jesus Christ Himself was “called of God an high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:10). Truly, One even more meek than Moses, “glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son” (Heb. 5:5).

Worthiness was always a prerequisite to being called of God and to minister in His authority. Because of the apostasy and wickedness of the Israelites in the wilderness, including worshiping a golden calf, God took the Patriarchal Priesthood held by Adam, Melchizedek (the first priest mentioned in the Bible), Moses, and other prophets, out of their midst. A lesser priesthood, with less power and authority, called the “Aaronic (Levitical) Priesthood” was conferred upon the Levites on behalf of Israel. This priesthood was limited to the lineage of Levi, with further restrictions to the office of priest and higher priest limited to descendents of Aaron. Had Israel been obedient, instead of limitations of lineage and power, they would have indeed become, “a kingdom of priests and an holy nation” (Ex. 19:6).

Roles and Requirements of Levites

From the time of Moses to Jesus Christ, priesthood authority was confined to the prophets and to the tribe of Levi. The general function of the Levitical priesthood was to maintain and assure, as well as reestablish, the holiness of the chosen people of God (Ex. 28:38; Num. 18:1). The priesthood fulfilled this duty by mediating the covenant of God with Israel (Mal. 2:4; Num. 18:19; Jer 33:20-26).

Levites were required to be male descendents of Levi between the ages of 25 and 50 (Num. 8:24-26). They were consecrated by means of rituals (Num. 8:5-13) and supported by tithes (Num. 18:21, 24).

Levites carried the duty of serving as substitutes for first born sons of Israelites (Num. 3:11-13). They served as porters (1 Chr. 23:2-4), gatekeepers (1 Chr. 26:1-19), treasurers (1 Chr. 9:26), musicians and choir members (Num. 3:6-9; 1 Chr. 23:5), and assistants to the priests (Num. 1:3:6, 8; 1 Chr. 23:28).

Levites dismantled, transported, and set up the tabernacle and its furnishings and vessels, served in weekly courses, then returned home for the remainder of the year and had regular occupations (Num. 1:48-54; 4:3-15).

Roles and Requirements of Priests

The priests were Levites descended from Aaron who were authorized to officiate in the rituals at the tabernacle (Ex. 28:1). They had to be unblemished (one was disqualified as a priest due to being blind, lame, a dwarf, a hunchback, being scabbed, or other certain blemishes) (Lev. 21:16-23); were required to be between 30 and 50 years old (Num. 4:3); were consecrated through a series of rituals including washing, anointing, and clothing (Ex. 29:1-37; 30:22-29; 40:12-15; Lev. 8:10-11); were clothed with four sacred vestments (Ex. 28); could not “be defiled for the dead” (Lev. 21:1); and could not marry a harlot or divorcee (Lev. 21:7).

Priests were required to offer daily sacrifices, which made atonement for Israel (Ex. 29:38-42; Lev. 1; 6:19-23; see Figure 2). They evaluated ritual impurities (Lev. 13-15); cared for the lamp, shewbread, and altars (Lev. 6:8-13; 24:1-9); carried the ark of the covenant (Deut. 10:8; 31:9, 25); burned incense (Ex. 30:7-8); served as teachers of the law and offered instructions of the law (Lev. 10:8-11; Deut. 33:10; Hosea 4:1-10; Mal. 2); acted as judges, a consequence of his imparting answers to legal questions (Deut. 17:8-9; 21:5; 1 Chr. 23:4; Ex. 33:7-11); blessed the Lord’s people (Num. 6:22-27; Deut. 10:8; 21:5); kept fire burning (Lev. 6:12-13); and blew trumpets (Num. 10:1-10). Priests were also permitted to conduct all the duties of the Levites. They were required to be holy (Num. 16:5), and to maintain personal and ritual purity in order to represent the people before God (Lev. 21).



Figure 2. Priests offer sacrifice at the altar.

Moses was instructed how to consecrate priests, preparatory to their holy ministry, “thou shalt put upon Aaron the holy garments, and anoint him, and sanctify him, that they may minister unto me in the priest’s office” (Ex. 40:13). Spiritually, washings of priests symbolized the cleansing of the body and the soul from sin and uncleanness. Anointing with olive oil sanctified recipients. Prophets (1 Kgs. 19:16), priests (Ex. 28:41), and kings were anointed with oil. Anointing with oil symbolized the Spirit, as demonstrated by the anointing of Saul (1 Sam. 10:1-11) and David (1 Sam. 16:13; see also Acts 10:38). The vestments of the priests, and more especially of the high priest, were both costly and beautiful (Ex. 28:3-5; Lev. 8:7-9). In connection with the consecration of priests, sacrifices were offered, including a sin offering, a burnt offering, and a special consecration offering (Lev. 8:14-32). Ram’s blood was applied to the right ear, thumb, and toe of Aaron and his sons to symbolize complete bodily consecration to the Lord (Lev. 14:28).

Roles and Requirements of High Priests

Under the law of Moses the presiding officer of the Aaronic Priesthood was called the high priest. The office was hereditary and came through the firstborn among the family of Aaron, Aaron himself being the first high priest of the Aaronic order. The High Priest represented Israel before the Lord, wearing Israel’s names on his shoulders (carved on onyx stones) and over his heart (with the tribes of Israel’s names carved on stones on his breastplate; see Ex. 28:9-29). He offered special sacrifices and entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement on behalf of Israel (Lev. 16). There, he wore white linen garments instead of his ordinary, more costly vestments. Only the high priest could offer the sacrifices for the sins of the priests, the people, or himself (Lev. 4).

Before becoming a high priest, one first served as a priest, perhaps even for years. He directed priests and Levites and consecrated priests (Ex. 29:1-37); maintained the menorah (Lev. 24:1-4); burned incense (Ex. 30:7-8; Lev. 16:12-13; see Figure 3); and oversaw and offered special sacrifices on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16; 23:6, 11, 15, 20). He wore and accessed the power of the Urim and Thummim, through which he inquired God’s will (Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21). The Urim and Thummim was apparently missing for a time, but its restoration was hoped for during the time of the second temple (Ezra 2:63). In addition to the duties of the priests, he was to offer the sacrifices on sabbaths, new moons, and yearly festivals. He was required to offer a meat offering twice daily for himself (Lev. 6:19-23).



Figure 3. A high priest offers incense at the altar.

Fulfillment of the Law of Moses

The fulfilling of the Law of Moses by the Lamb of God brought about an end to priestly duties pertaining to the law of Moses. Having fulfilled their role as “the example and shadow of heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5), priestly offerings of animal sacrifice under the law of Moses, with their expiatory rites, stood fulfilled because of the infinite and eternal sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

According to the symbolism and pattern of the ancient tabernacle, neither the people nor the priests could be brought into the presence of God by the Law of Moses. Paul explained, “the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest” (Heb. 9:8). “It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be...with better sacrifices than these. For Christ is not entered into the holy places

made with hands...but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb. 9:23-24).

The new covenant and law of the gospel delivered by Jesus was better, in every way, than the Law of Moses (see Heb. 8-9). It was administered by a better high priest, who “needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice” (Heb. 7:27). Rather, Jesus offered a sacrifice “once, when he offered up himself” (Heb. 7:27). He was worthy to officiate for Israel and enter the Holy of Holies by virtue of His perfect and sinless life (see Heb. 3:1; 7:26). High priests under the order of Aaron offered the blood of goats and a bullock. The sacrifice of the Lamb of God was “neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood” (Heb. 9:12). The old covenant, the law of Moses, was preparatory and temporary. The new covenant was Christ’s higher law. The people who accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday acclaimed him as the high priest by quoting from Psalms 118:25–26: “Hosanna”—which means “Please, O Lord, save please”—“Blessed is he who comes with the Name of the Lord.”

With the law fulfilled and the demands of animal sacrifice met, the new and higher law, founded in love, became more valuable than animals sacrifices. “And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love *his* neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12:33).

Jesus as Our High Priest

When John saw Jesus approaching to be baptized of him, John testified, “Behold the Lamb of God.” This is a significant and appropriate title, having reference to the millions of lambs which had been slaughtered up to that time as a similitude and foreshadowing. John continued his priestly duty of teaching the congregation as he said, “which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). As the Lamb of God, Jesus became the offering, “the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2). Jesus said of John the Baptist, “there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.” This statement was necessary to give context to the second half of His statement, “notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11). It was essential for the disciples of John, one of the great and noble priests of all time, to understand the role and stature of the Lamb of God. John understood that he and his ministry, as well as all priests who ever had been, were consecrated to point hearts and minds to the Lamb of God. Thus John humbly taught his disciples, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Not only was Jesus the offering, but Jesus became the offerer (of the offering), a duty of the office of High Priest. “For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Heb. 5:1). All previous called were “a” high priest, but Jesus became “our” High Priest. His offering (as both offerer and offering) was a propitiation not only for the Israelites at one moment in time, but eternally and infinitely, and for the whole world.

High priests were required to offer sacrifice for their own sins because they were mortal and imperfect (Heb. 7:27-28). Some were even quite wicked, having fully apostatised from the God of Israel. The chief priests of Jesus’ day rejected Jesus, the very High Priest they were called to represent. They had allowed the temple, the very place set apart for their Holy labors, to become a “den of thieves” (Matt. 21:13). Speaking to the chief priests, Jesus rebuked, “did ye never read in the scriptures, the stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner” (Matt. 21:42).

Jesus condescended from His throne as the God of Israel to become mortal, “to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17). His empathy was earned by personal experience in His mortal tabernacle. As a mortal, He too, “was in all points tempted like as we are”, and could be “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Heb. 4:15).

As the high priest in Israel passed through the veil into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement, as part of the cleansing rites which freed Israel from sin (see Lev. 16), so Jesus has entered into heaven to prepare the way for those who accept His offering to also enter into the presence of God. This was symbolized by the veil of the temple being torn “from the top to the bottom” (Matt. 27:51), giving not just one high priest on one day per year, but all true disciples access to God’s presence (see Heb. 10:19-22).

Paul summarizes to his Hebrew audience, “Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such a high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Heb. 8:1). He is no longer referring to the mercy seat, which is simply His earthly throne, but the majestic throne in the heavens. He’s not referring to the order of Aaron, which was temporary. He’s speaking of One who holds the Eternal, or Melchizedek Priesthood. He’s not referring to a minister of the tabernacle built by the hands of mortals, but a “minister of the sanctuary...the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched” (Heb. 8:2). The Anointed One was not a minister of the representation, or a “shadow of heavenly things”, but the very “mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises” (Heb. 8:6). The promises of this new covenant, with its higher priestly authority after the order of Melchizedek brings with it “the power of an endless life” (Heb. 7:16).

Priests stand in the place of Jesus Christ to administer essential ordinances to His disciples. All priests typified Christ as a mediator between the disciple and God. In fulfillment of the priestly duties under the Law of Moses, God sent a great High Priest, who became the Mediator of a new, better covenant, with better promises. Under the new covenant, the law was written on the heart instead of on stone tablets. William Tyndale, in reference to Hebrews, must have understood the significance of the new covenant when he wrote, “this epistle is the principal and most excellent part of the new testament...that is to say glad tidings and what we call the gospel, and also a light and a way in unto the whole scripture.” (William Tyndale’s Prologue Upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans). It is the fulfillment and culmination of all sacrifices and performances. Old Testament priests, high priests, their vestments, performances, sacrifices, and symbols were all designed to point the mind and heart of the children of Israel to Jesus Christ.

Paul, in sublime and powerful words, teaches the personal power available to us when he writes, “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). Surely the Hebrews had been taught of the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies, which represented the throne of God. They had been taught by Paul and others that they were saved by the grace of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the imagery of boldly coming to the throne of grace to obtain mercy and find grace must have encouraged the hearts of his new Christian converts. So too in our day can understanding this doctrine of the priesthood of the Lamb of God change minds and hearts, pointing us to the Lamb of God, our great High Priest, through whom we may enter the presence of God.