

Two priesthoods

What comes to your mind when you see or hear the word, "priest"?

Do you think of a man wearing a clerical collar? Or do you think of the priests of Baal? Do you think about God's Old Testament, Aaronic priesthood? Or perhaps about the Sadducees of Jesus Christ's human lifetime? What of God's priesthood that will exist in the world tomorrow? And what about the world today? Or, more correctly, what about the church today? Does a priesthood exist in God's church today? Is the church of God under a priesthood today?

Easton's opinion

As I was studying the subject of God's priests and priesthood, I looked up the word "priest" in M.G. Easton's Bible Dictionary. Here's what Mr. Easton says:

Priest: The Heb. kohen, Gr. hierus, Lat. sacerdos, always denote one who offers sacrifices.

- 1. At first every man was his own priest, and presented his own sacrifices before God.**
- 2. Afterwards that office devolved on the head of the family, as in the cases of:
 - a. Noah: Genesis 8:20**
 - b. Abraham: Genesis 12:7, 13:4**
 - c. Isaac: Genesis 26:25**
 - d. Jacob: Genesis 31:54**
 - e. Job: Job 1:5****
- 3. The name first occurs as applied to Melchizedek: Genesis 14:18**
- 4. 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 Leviticus 21:16-23. There are ordinances also regarding the priests' dress: Exodus 28:40-43 and the manner of their consecration to the office: Exodus 29:1-37. Their duties were manifold: Exodus 27:20-21, 29:38-44, Leviticus 6:12, 10:11, 24:8, Numbers 10:1-10, Deuteronomy 17:8-13, 33:10, Malachi 2:7. They represented the people before God, and offered the various sacrifices prescribed in the law. In the time of David the priests were divided into twenty-four courses or classes: 1 Chronicles 24:7-18 This number was retained after the Captivity: Ezra 2:36-39, Nehemiah 7:39-42.**

5. **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.)**
6. **The term "priest" is indeed applied to believers: 1Pet 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."**

Is Easton correct?

One of Mr. Easton's statements that jumped right out at me was the one that says: "There is now no human priesthood." But after this statement, he contradicts himself three times:

First, he writes that that the whole priestly system was a type and a shadow of the Body of Christ. This is true. But is not the Body of Christ the church of God? (I Corinthians 12:27) And, although filled with and guided by God's Holy Spirit, are not the living members of God's church still human?

Secondly, Mr. Easton writes that 'the term "priest" is indeed applied to believers' and that 'all true believers are now "kings and priests unto God.'" The true believers of the church of God are living human beings!

Thirdly, Easton writes that the references by Peter and John to Christians being priests imply no sacerdotal functions." The word "sacerdotal" simply means "priestly." Then he again contradicts his own words by stating that 'as priests they have free access to the holiest of all, and offer up the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, and the sacrifices of grateful service from day to day'!

In this study, let us ask some questions: Can we and should we spiritualize away all mentions of a New Testament era priesthood? Are the ministers of the New Testament church of God part of a priesthood? Are *all* the members of the New Testament church of God part of a priesthood? Or are the church members *under* a priesthood? If we are to be part of a priesthood, is the era of our priesthood totally in the future?

Let's get the timing right!

In studying this subject, we need to begin by making sure that we have a clear understanding – from God's point of view – of the various historic eras of God's people and the authority they lived under then and do live under now. We need to know which era the human Jesus lived in, which era the early church members lived in, and which era we live in today.

Although the books of what is commonly called "the New Testament" begin with the gospel account of Matthew, we should remember that, in reality, the New Testament era did not begin until the death of Jesus Christ, the Testator:

And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. (Hebrews 9:15-17)

This means that, for the greater part of the era of the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Israelites were under the Old Testament administration, and that Jesus Himself was under the rules and laws of the Old Testament era. As a human, He was a citizen of the nation of Israel, and specifically of the tribe of Judah. He put Himself under the laws that He had originally given to Israel, and He made Himself subject to them. So the human Jesus was under the Old Testament Levitical priesthood which, at that time, was controlled by the Sadducees.

When we are looking for the rules that apply to God's New Testament church, therefore, we must examine the scriptures that begin with the death of Jesus, plus the scriptures that were written before His death but refer to the era after His death. As the New Testament era had a beginning, it also will have an end. The Old and New Testaments might perhaps be more accurately named the First Covenant and the Second (or Better) Covenant as God inspired the author of the book of Hebrews to name them:

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second... Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. (Hebrews 8:6-7; 9:1)

This is not meant to suggest that God created anything imperfect but, if we really think about it, even the periods of the two covenants do not cover the whole of man's history. As the "First Covenant" began at (or shortly after) Sinai and ended at Jesus' death, it is clear that the eras of Bible history cannot be limited to the two covenant periods. Another writer might list them slightly differently but, simply stated, the major eras of Biblical history are these:

1. Eternity prior to the creation of the physical universe
2. The period of the original creation of the beautiful universe
3. The period of prehistoric, angelic rule of the earth
4. The "tohu and bohu" period after Satan's rebellion
5. The renewing of the earth
6. Man's short Eden era
7. From Eden to the Flood
8. From the Flood to the Tower of Babel
9. From the Tower of Babel to Abraham
10. From Abraham to the Exodus
11. From the Exodus to Sinai
12. From Sinai to the possession of Canaan
13. From the possession of Canaan to the division of Israel and Judah
14. From the division of Israel and Judah to the captivity of Israel
15. From the captivity of Israel to the captivity of Judah
16. The exile of Judah
17. From Judah's return from exile to the conception and birth of Jesus Christ

18. Jesus' human lifetime
19. From Jesus' death to His resurrection
20. From Jesus' resurrection to His ascension
21. From Jesus' ascension to the coming of the Holy Spirit (the beginning of the New Testament church of God)
22. From the coming of the Holy Spirit to the destruction of the Temple
23. From the destruction of the Temple to the end times (This is our era, today)
24. The great tribulation and the place of safety
25. The return of Jesus Christ, the first resurrection, and the imprisonment of Satan
26. The Day of the Lord
27. The Millennium
28. The temporary release of Satan and the second resurrection
29. The Great White Throne Judgment period
30. The relocation of God the Father and His throne to earth
31. Eternity beyond the Father's relocation to earth

Again, the era we are living in today is listed as number 23 above. We live in the era that began with the destruction of the temple in 70AD, and will continue until the time of the Great Tribulation and the Place of Safety.

A kingdom of priests

Let us briefly look back at the Exodus period. The era of the Aaronic priesthood began a little less than a year after Israel was freed from Egypt (see Exodus 40:2). Nine months before the ordination of the Aaronic order, however, a priesthood of sorts already existed amongst the Israelites:

"Also let the priests who come near the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them"... Then the LORD said to him, "Away! Get down and then come up, you and Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest He break out against them." (Exodus 19:22, 24)

Most commentators agree that this pre-Aaronic priesthood was probably made up of the heads of families. Earlier at this same meeting, God told Moses that the Israelites were to be a kingdom of priests:

And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel:.. 'And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Verses 3, 6)

Did He just mean that Israel would be a kingdom that had a priesthood or a kingdom that was under a priesthood? To plagiarize Herbert W. Armstrong's method of logic: If a person said, "Look! There goes a pack of wolves!," he would mean, of course, that every animal in that pack is a wolf. No foxes. No dogs. Every one a wolf! And if a person were to say, "The Giglis are a family of musicians," he would be implying that every member of the Gigli family is a musician. Likewise, when God says that Israel shall be a kingdom of priests, He is implying that He wants every Israelite to become, to some extent, a priest. Another section of Mr. Easton's article agrees:

The priests were not distributed over the country, but lived together in certain cities [48, of which six were cities of refuge], 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.

Just as every Israelite was to be a citizen of God's holy nation, God tells us in Exodus 19:6 that every Israelite was also to be a priest. Those in other tribes than Levi, therefore, were also classed as priests but did not possess the same priestly authority and responsibility as the Aaronites.

Initially, at the time of the exodus, God commanded that the firstborn of each Israelite family be dedicated to Him for His service:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is mine"... "And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you, that you shall set apart to the LORD all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the LORD'S. But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem." (Exodus 13:1-2; 11-13)

You shall not delay to offer the first of your ripe produce and your juices. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. Likewise you shall do with your oxen and your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to me." (Exodus 22:29-30)

All that open the womb are mine, and every male firstborn among your livestock, whether ox or sheep. But the firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb. And if you will not redeem him, then you shall break his neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty-handed. (Exodus 34:19-20)

Later, God commanded that the tribe of Levi be dedicated to His service so that the valuable firstborn son, although still His, would not have to be taken away from each family:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Now behold, I myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be mine, because all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD"... Then the LORD said to Moses: "Number all the firstborn males of the children of Israel from a month old and above, and take the number of their names. And you shall take the Levites for me—I am the LORD—instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the livestock of the children of Israel." So Moses numbered all the firstborn among the children of Israel, as the LORD commanded him. And all the firstborn males, according to the number of names from a month old and above, of those who were numbered of them, were twenty-two thousand two hundred and seventy-three. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of their livestock. The Levites shall be mine: I am the LORD. And for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the children of Israel, who are more than the number of the Levites..." (Numbers 3:11-13, 40-46)

"For they are wholly given to me from among the children of Israel; I have taken them for myself instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel. For all the firstborn among the children of Israel are mine, both man and beast; on the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to myself. I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn of the children of Israel." (Numbers 8:16-18)

Even after setting apart the Levites and Aaronites, God said that the firstborn were still His, still claimed by Him, still special to Him:

Everything that first opens the womb of all flesh, which they bring to the LORD, whether man or beast, shall be yours;...

Aaron's, that is, and the Aaronic priesthood's, on behalf of God:
See verses 1-2, 6 and 8]...

... nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. (Numbers 18:15)

It appears that, even after the institution of the Aaronic priesthood, God still claimed all the firstborn of Israel as His own and as special to Him. Later, after the Jews had returned from captivity in Babylon, they re-instituted God's ownership of the firstborn:

To bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God; (Nehemiah 10:36)

So, even though the Levites were set apart for God's service and the Aaronites were set apart for the official priesthood, the firstborn of all the tribes of Israel were still set apart as special to God. God gave the Levites and Aaronites responsibility and authority to be full-time servants in His service. This verse in Nehemiah indicates that, unless redeemed, a firstborn boy would be sent to the temple to serve God under – and as an assistant to – the Aaronic priests. Whether redeemed or not, the firstborn boys were special to God and His service. This is perhaps how God intended the religious teaching in each family to take place: The parents of one child (and therefore relatively less busy, only having one child) were to teach their firstborn. As other children came along, the redeemed firstborn child gradually took more responsibility from the increasingly busy parents in the religious teaching of the subsequent children. There is a logical hierarchy here:

- From the LORD (the great High Priest) to the Aaronic priests,
- From the Aaronic priests to the family heads,
- From the family heads to their firstborn,
- From the firstborn to the subsequent children.

Repeating from Easton's article:

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], 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.

Without taking the responsibility from the parents and the older children, God wanted full-time human servants and a full-time priesthood.

Within the veil

Let us now take a leap forward in time to the period of Jesus' earthly sojourn. Although there is strong evidence that the human Jesus was ordained as High Priest at the time of His conception (see below) and the active Aaronic priesthood continued until the destruction of the temple in 70AD, at the instant of Jesus' death when the veil of the temple was torn in two, a major change took place in the average human being's accessibility to the Most Holy Place, to God Himself, and to the possibility of membership in His priesthood.

Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, (Matthew 27:51)

Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Mark 15:38)

Then the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two. (Luke 23:45)

Before this momentous day, the veil had been a physical barrier between the temple's Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (otherwise named the Holy of Holies). It was also a symbolic barrier between physical men and the great God. Before the rending of the veil, only the Aaronic high priest was permitted to pass beyond the veil into the Most Holy Place, and even then only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

Shortly after His resurrection, Jesus ascended to His Father's throne room in heaven – the spiritual reality of the physical and symbolic Most Holy Place. As did Jesus Christ, our High Priest, our Elder Brother, and our Forerunner, we too have a hope of passing beyond the veil in God's heavenly temple, and entering into His Most Holy Place:

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 6:19-20)

If Jesus entered as the High Priest and Forerunner for us, then it is logical that we will follow Him as "after-runners" and lower-ranked priests. Assuredly, this is not to say that heaven is the eternal reward of Christians – even though there are strong indications that we are promised at least one visit there (most likely for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb – Revelation 14:1-4, 19:5-9). Also, we know that Jesus Christ, yes and even God the Father, both have plans to eventually move their thrones from heaven to earth, from which time God's people will be pillars in the temple of God for eternity (Revelation 3:12, 7:15, 21:2-3, 22). The veil of the physical temple also represented the human flesh of the Son of God:

By a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, (Hebrews 10:20)

The veil of the physical temple was moved aside each Day of Atonement to allow the Aaronic high priest to enter the Most Holy Place. That veil was ripped asunder at the instant Jesus died. The tearing of the physical veil and the simultaneous destruction of Jesus' flesh made it possible for our High Priest and Forerunner to enter the Most Holy Place of God's temple in heaven. Also, as we have already seen, the destruction of Jesus' flesh, which was pictured by the tearing of the temple veil, will allow His brethren to eventually follow Him into that temple and into its Most Holy Place.

AD 31 to AD 70

The scriptures that refer to priests and priesthood in the four gospel accounts and in the book of Acts all refer to the Aaronic priesthood, which still existed at that time. Jesus and the apostles gave due respect to that priesthood, even though it had strayed far from what its Creator meant it to be.

There are post-resurrection scriptures that indicate that the early church members still attended temple and synagogue services during the thirty-nine years between the death of Christ and the destruction of the Temple. What was their attitude towards the Aaronic priesthood during that transition period? Although the priests had become corrupt, the church members maintained a level of respect for the priesthood, knowing that God was the One who put them in place and that He would make the necessary changes in His own good time.

In Acts 6:7, Luke tells us that a large number of priests converted to Christianity:

Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

This is a surprise! Perhaps some surviving members of John the Baptist's family were among these obedient, Christian priests (Luke 1:5-9). Luke does not state whether or not these men subsequently left the priesthood, but we may assume that they did not.

Although almost two thousand years have gone by since then, the church today is basically in the same era and under the same administration as it was at its very beginning on the Feast of Pentecost in the year 31AD. The only real difference is that the Aaronic/Sadducee priesthood of the post-crucifixion era, which remained from 31AD until some time after 70 AD, no longer exists with any level of real authority today. We can be sure that God had a good reason why He allowed the Sadducee priesthood to continue for that thirty-nine or so years rather than having it terminated at the same time as the death of Jesus. Perhaps part of the reason was to allow the first era of the church to continue through similar trials (i.e. the resistance of and persecution by the Jewish leadership) as their Chief Apostle had endured.

The priesthood in the book of Hebrews

The first New Testament scriptures referring to the New Testament priesthood begin with those in the epistle to the Hebrews. Let us examine them:

Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:17)

Jesus, during His human lifetime, was in training – through the building of faithfulness and mercy – to become the High Priest of the Melchizedek priesthood. There is an implication here that, as He made Himself like His human brothers for the preparation for the New Testament priesthood, His human brothers were also to make themselves like Him, and that we too are in training for that same priesthood.

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus. (Hebrews 3:1)

Although He is no longer a human being, but has returned to His former place as a great, born-again Spirit Being, Jesus is still the chief Apostle. Does this mean that there should be no other human apostles to follow Him? We know very well that it does not, because we can clearly read that human apostles are mentioned over and over again in the New Testament. Using the same logic, can we say that, because Jesus Christ is the High Priest of the New Testament priesthood, no other priests should follow Him?

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. (Hebrews 4:14)

Once again, we see that Jesus is our great High Priest, and that He now resides in heaven as the Firstborn, born-again Son of God. Seeing this, we are to hold fast our confession – even though we are still human and earth-bound. What is "our confession"? The Greek word is *homologia* and it is referring to what we profess, even while still human. It is what God's people believe and what we teach. But there is more to it than that. The English word "homology" comes from this Greek word *homologia* and means *harmony, conformity, conformance, concurrence, correspondence, coincidence, concordance, homogeneity, and similarity*. In biology, the word *homology* is used to show, for example, the similarities between the skeletal structure of a bird's wing and a human arm, hand and fingers. If we apply this sense to this verse, we might paraphrase it to read: Let us hold fast the priestly and godly similarities between our great High Priest who has gone from human to eternal and His brethren who are, for the time-being, still human.

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

The author of the book of Hebrews reminds us again that, although our High Priest is so great and so far above us now, He once brought Himself down to the human level. Thus He can identify with what we are going through, because He has been through it. Again there is an implication here that because Jesus (our Forerunner) did His priestly training as a human, we too are to have confidence as we go through our priestly training program.

For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. (Hebrews 5:1)

Here, the author is writing about the human high priests of the Aaronic priesthood. Although human, they were ordained "for men in things pertaining to God". The author recognized that, even at the time he wrote this – after the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our great High Priest – it was still the duty of the Aaronic priests to make sure that all gifts and sacrifices were offered to God according to His instructions. It is interesting to note that the author mentions this requirement at this time. The estimated time of the writing of this epistle was 68 AD, just two short years before the destruction of the temple and the termination of the Aaronic priesthood.

So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." (Hebrews 5:5)

This very important scripture is quoted from Psalms 2:7:

I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to me, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you.

Even though He was worthy of the office, Jesus did not exalt Himself as the Eternal High Priest. It was God the Father who honored Him, ordained Him and gave Him the office as His first-begotten and first-born Son:

Jesus answered, "If I honor myself, my honor is nothing. It is my Father who honors me, of whom you say that He is your God. (John 8:54)

An interesting question arises here: When was the human Jesus ordained as High Priest by His Father? The Aaronic priests – including the high priests, of course – were dedicated to God's service from their birth, probably even from their begetting. As soon as it was known that a woman of the sub-tribe of Aaron was pregnant, the chance that the baby would be male would generate a series of preparations for the arrival of a new priest. The child's priestly training began as soon as possible in his early childhood.

Hebrews 5:5 strongly indicates that Jesus was ordained as High Priest at the same time as He was begotten as the Son of God – at the instant of His conception in Mary's womb. This means that Jesus was the High Priest even while still human. As we shall see, Jesus was the High Priest of the Melchizedek priesthood before His human birth. So we can conclude that He carried this office without a break from His pre-human existence into His human existence.

By extension, considering our homology – our similarity, our likeness – with our Elder Brother, we can see the probability that the members of God's church were ordained as lower-ranked priests at the time of our spiritual conception – at the time of our baptism, when God gave us His Holy Spirit. Continuing in the fifth chapter of Hebrews, where we see the first New Testament mention of Melchizedek:

As He also says in another place: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek"; (Hebrews 5:6)

Who is the "He" that said this in another place? Was it David? Yes, this verse was quoted from a Psalm of David. But this "He" is the same "He" as the One mentioned in Hebrews 5:5. It was the Father of the Son. It was God the Father. And where is the "other place" that He said this? Hebrews 5:6 was quoted from Psalm 110:4:

The LORD has sworn and will not relent, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

This verse, when examined with its previous three verses (Psalm 110:1-3), brings up some other interesting questions: Is the LORD (YHWH – in David's time still with His Father in heaven) speaking through David and referring to Himself in the future as the human Jesus and High Priest? Or could He perhaps be referring to David as a typical example of His people being future priests of the Melchizedek order? Notice that David writes "priest" and not specifically "high priest." Remember also that, like Jesus, David was of the tribe of Judah, not of the tribe of Levi. Perhaps the fulfillment of Psalm 110:4, Hebrews 5:5-6 and Psalm 2:7 are dual, referring first to Christ (the First-begotten and Firstborn of God) and secondly to Jesus' brethren. Continuing in chapter 5 of Hebrews:

And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," (Hebrews 5:9-10)

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews first (in the preceding verses) establishes that Jesus is the High Priest of the New Testament era. He then proves that He is a Priest of the Melchizedek order. And here, for the first time, he brings the two together and states that Jesus is the High Priest of the Melchizedek order.

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, (Hebrews 7:1)

The author of Hebrews is referring to Genesis 14:18-20. Let us briefly examine that account:

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand. And he gave him a tithes of all.

Melchizedek went to meet Abram after the slaughter of the kings and the freeing of Lot (Genesis 14:14-16). He was the Priest of the Most High God. Melchizedek blessed Abram in the name of the Most High God. He also blessed the Most High God Himself and declared that it was He who gave Abram his recent victory. Abram paid tithes to Melchizedek. We can assume, therefore that Abram recognized Melchizedek as the true Priest and representative of God. Continuing in chapter 7 of Hebrews:

To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated "king of righteousness," and then also king of Salem, meaning "king of peace," (Hebrews 7:2)

We might add the title, "King of justice" per Strong's Concordance:

Melchizedek:

***Malkiy-Tsedeq:* "my king is Sedek": from:**

***Meh'-lek:* King, royal, and**

***Tsedeq:* righteousness, just, justice, righteous, righteously, right**

Progressing in verse 3:

Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.

The author supplies some more information about Melchizedek. He was without father, mother, descent, beginning or end of life. He was and is eternal! He was and is like the Son of God! He was and is an eternal priest! If we put all these facts together, we will see that Melchizedek must be the Eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham; (Hebrews 7:5)

The author wrote of the Levitical-Aaronic priesthood here again with the understanding that they were still in office at the time of writing (circa 68 AD). The mention of the Levitical-Aaronic priesthood maintaining the commandment to take tithes from the Israelites of that time and place refers to the previous verse (Hebrews 7:4) where Melchizedek took a tenth of Abram's spoils. One implication in these verses is that all eras of God's people are to pay tithes to the appropriate priesthood of their day. Another implication is that, as Abram (the forefather of Levi and Aaron) paid tithes to Melchizedek, the Levitical-Aaronic priests who were descended from Abram were subordinate to the Melchizedek priesthood. The author expands upon this point in verses 6 to 10 but, as these verses are not very relevant to our discussion, we will skip them and move on to verse 11.

Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? (Hebrews 7:11)

The author here writes that the Aaronic priesthood was imperfect even though the Israelites received the law under it. The concept of it was perfect, of course, because God designed it. But the practice of it was imperfect because it was comprised of imperfect human beings. Biblical history clearly shows that the actions of the Aaronic priests were far from perfect. Secondly, the Aaronic priesthood was a physical symbol – or shadow (Hebrews 8:5 and 10:1) – of God's perfect Melchizedek priesthood to which it was subject. Also, the Aaronic priesthood was imperfect in that it only governed the physical Israelites and any proselytes who might come along and submit to it. It held no power over Gentiles. And the conversion of Gentiles was part of God's plan.

More interesting questions arise from these verses:

- Did the Aaronic priesthood become obsolete at the time of the human conception of Jesus Christ – when He received the office of High Priest?
- Or at His death – at the rending of the temple veil?
- Or did God just allow it to terminate after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD?
- Was that "termination" a temporary one?
- If it were not for the destruction of the temple, would the Aaronic priesthood have continued, and would it even still be in office today?
- If the temple were to be partially or fully rebuilt again, would the Aaronic priesthood be re-established for the third time and, if so, would it be valid in God's sight?
- Can God have two priestly orders – the Melchizedek and the Aaronic – in office at the same time?
- Was the Melchizedek order still in office during the era between the time of the ordination of the Aaronic priesthood and the human conception of Jesus Christ?
- Was the Aaronic order still valid in God's sight during the era between the time of the human conception of Jesus and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD?

Later scriptures will answer some of these questions but, for now, let us continue in the book of Hebrews:

For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. (Hebrews 7:12)

The author states that the priesthood was being changed at the time of his writing this. The words "being changed" and "there is" are both in the present tense. The priesthood was in the process of being changed at that time because the human Jesus Christ had been given the office of High Priest. The Melchizedek priesthood was not new, of course, but this was the first time that a human being had been permitted to hold office in the Melchizedek order. Others would follow. So, because the priesthood was being changed, the law had to be changed too. Notice, by the way, that the law was changed, not abolished. As previously mentioned, the Aaronic priesthood and its associated laws were restricted to the nation of Israel and, to a somewhat limited extent, to its proselytes. Although God had opened the way for Gentiles to be called into His church, and although first century *Israelite* church members were still able to attend temple and synagogue services, and although some Aaronic/Sadducee priests had been called into the New Testament church, God knew that the temple and synagogue authorities would not openly accept Gentile Christian converts to freely partake of their services.

The Melchizedek priesthood existed before either Israel or the Aaronic priesthood were instituted. The laws of the Melchizedek priesthood were not – and are not – restricted to the physical nation of Israel. They governed God's people before the nation of Israel existed, and they govern the New Testament church today. The church is made up of spiritual Israelites, yes, but physically they are called and chosen from all nations.

For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood. (Hebrews 7:13-14)

Jesus Christ, as we have seen, was ordained to the post of High Priest. The human Jesus was not of the tribe of Levi or of the priestly family of Aaron and, therefore, was not eligible for a life as a priest of the Aaronic order. Jesus was of the tribe of Judah (Matthew 1:3; Luke 3:33). But unlike most Israelite firstborn male children, Jesus was not redeemed (Luke 2:23; Exodus 13:1-2, 11-16; 22:29-30; 34:19-20; Numbers 8:16-18; 18:15). Therefore, His whole life was to be dedicated to God's service.

The life of Samuel, likewise, who was of the non-priestly Levite line of Kohath, Izhar and Korah, confirms that a person does not have to be a member of the family of Aaron to be totally dedicated to God's service.

Why would it not be the same for Jesus' brothers and sisters? Were we not dedicated to lives of service to God at our baptisms? Was not each of us ordained at our spiritual begettal? Although we know that God chose His children before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5), it is not reasonable to believe that we were actually ordained as His priests while we were still unconverted.

And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. (Hebrews 7:15-16)

Jesus was and is the High Priest in the likeness of Melchizedek. He was the same Eternal One, using the name Melchizedek, who met Abram after the slaughter of the kings. His position as High Priest is not based on "the law of a fleshly commandment." It is not based upon the physical requirement that the Aaronic priesthood was based on – i.e. that all Israelite priests should be of the family of Aaron. Rather, it is based on His eternal life and His power over death. But again, if this position of High Priest was given to the human Jesus at the beginning of His physical life – at His conception, does it not follow that God the Father gives the office of Melchizedek order priests to His other children at our spiritual begettal?

For He testifies: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." (Hebrews 7:17)

The author repeats – probably for emphasis – this quote from Psalm 110:4. He had previously quoted it in Hebrews 5:6. Again, it was not just David who testifies that Jesus is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. It was God the Father.

And inasmuch as *He was not made priest without an oath*, by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant. (Hebrews 7:20, 22)

The four italicized words of this verse have been added in as implied, but they were not included in the original text. If we join the seven unitalicized words of verse 20 to verse 22, and leave out the parenthetical verse 21 for this purpose, it reads:

And inasmuch as not without an oath, by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant.

Not without an oath. Not by the law of a fleshly commandment, as with the Aaronic priesthood (verse 16), but by an oath. And this was not just any oath. This was the oath of God! (See verse 21 and Psalm 110:4). Because Jesus did have an oath behind His office of High Priest, we can have a surety – a solid guarantee, a fuller confidence – that His new covenant (KJV: testament), which was brought about by His death and His perfect sacrifice, is better and more trustworthy than that brought about by all the physical sacrifices offered by the Aaronic priesthood (Hebrews 8:6; 9:16). Now let us look at the parenthetical verse 21 to find out what that oath was:

(For they have become priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him who said to Him: "The LORD has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'"),

To stress the importance of this verse, the author repeats Psalm 110:4 yet again. The Aaronic priests were given their positions without an oath. They received their offices from their family lineage. But Jesus' office of High Priest was sealed by an oath of the great God. Perhaps our offices as lesser priests were sealed by a similar, awesome oath from God!

Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. (Hebrews 7:23)

During Jesus' human lifetime, seventeen thousand priests and Levites were on duty at the temple each Holy Day. Why was it necessary that there be so many Aaronic priests? It was necessary because they were limited by their brief life spans and other human attributes. Their lives were cut short by death. As new Aaronites were being born every year, there was naturally a great deal of overlap and one generation of priests trained the next.

But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:24-25)

Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, is not hindered by death as were the Aaronic priests. He possesses eternal life. So His priesthood was and is unchangeable. The nature of His priesthood was virtually the same at the time of the writing of the book of Hebrews as it was at His death, as it was at His conception, as it was at the time of David, and as it was at the time of Abraham. The only difference that would be made to the Melchizedek priesthood is that, through Jesus, His human brothers and sisters would be added as priests. More on this later.

For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; (Hebrews 7:26)

In this verse the author shows how exalted our great High Priest is above the Aaronic priests and above any other human being. The New King James Version translates the Greek word "prepo" as "was fitting for." The old King James Version uses the somewhat archaic English form of the word "became." The Greek word can be translated as "comely," "to stand out," "to be conspicuous," "to be eminent," "to be becoming," "seemly," or "fit." Substituting these terms into the context of this verse, our great High Priest, compared with the Aaronic priesthood and with His human brothers and sisters, is:

- outstanding,
- conspicuous,
- eminent (distinguished, famous, celebrated, glorious, grand, great, exalted, preeminent, high, lofty, elevated, prominent),
- becoming (suitable, appropriate, worthy, apt, correct, proper),
- seemly (appropriate, timely, befitting, right, suited),
- fitting

The imperfect tense of the Greek word "prepo" used in this verse shows that our High Priest is all of these things on an ongoing basis – not just in the past.

Who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. (Hebrews 7:27)

It is not necessary for our great High Priest to offer daily sacrifices, as did the Aaronic high priests. He was and is without sin. For the sins of God's people (spiritual Israel) He offered one perfect sacrifice: His own sinless self.

For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever. (Hebrews 7:28)

Although God commanded in Leviticus 21:17-23 that the Aaronic priests – including the high priests – were to be as physically perfect as possible, they all were in fact imperfect just because they were physical and human. Their human nature made them subject to "weakness" (Greek *asthenia*: infirmity, disease, and sickness). But God's oath, which He spoke at some time after giving the law (and which, therefore, superceded that law), consecrated Jesus Christ as a perfect High Priest, and as the only High Priest required for the rest of eternity. Notice that only one High Priest will be required for evermore. The author does not state – neither in this verse nor elsewhere – that only one priest will be required for evermore. On the contrary, other scriptures clearly affirm that God gives the lower offices of priest to Jesus' brethren.

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. (Hebrews 8:1-2)

Here, the author of the book of Hebrews begins his summary of what he has already written. God's New Testament people have a High Priest who sits at the right hand of God the Father in His heavenly throne room. God's heavenly temple and throne room are "the real things" from which the physical tabernacle, temples, and Most Holy Places were mere physical copies and symbols.

For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this One also have something to offer. (Hebrews 8:3)

The author here states why the Aaronic high priests were ordained. They were ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices to God. So if the Aaronic priesthood was the physical symbol and type of the Melchizedek priesthood, Jesus – the High Priest of the Melchizedek priesthood – should also have a sacrifice to offer. And, of course, He did. He offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice – the only perfect sacrifice!

For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; (Hebrews 8:4)

When Jesus was on earth, He had already been given the position of High Priest in the Melchizedek order. But during Jesus' physical lifetime, and at the time of the writing of this epistle to the Hebrews, the Aaronic priesthood still existed. It was, therefore, unnecessary for Jesus to duplicate the offering of physical sacrifices in accordance with the sacrificial law. It was more important for Him to spend His precious time preparing His perfect offering – the fulfillment of the imperfect, physical, Levitical offerings – for the time of His ultimate sacrifice.

At this point in our study we might also consider the offerings of God's New Testament church – our regular offerings and our Holy Day offerings. Who arranges their collection? Who prepares them for practical use in God's work? It is the ministers, the deacons, the ushers, and the accounting departments who perform these functions. These people might be considered New Testament counterparts of the different levels of priests and Levites. Also, God's New Testament people are to emulate the Aaronic priests and the sacrifice of our great High Priest by giving our very lives to God for His service (John 15:13; I John 3:16).

Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. (Hebrews 9:6)

What things were thus prepared (KJV "ordained")? The first five verses of this ninth chapter of Hebrews explain that the things being referred to here were the structure and furnishings of God's tabernacle, which were physical counterparts and symbols of various components of His temple – or palace as we may think of it – in Heaven. The lower-ranked Aaronic priests were permitted to enter only the outer rooms of "the first part of the tabernacle" (the Holy Place) to perform their physical service to God. Likewise, the human members of God's New Testament church are presently limited in how close we may approach God's throne. One day, that limitation will be removed and we will be given the same access as our Elder Brother (Romans 8:17, Revelation 21:7, II Peter 1:3, Hebrews 2:17, Ephesians 4:15).

But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; (Hebrews 9:7)

The Aaronic high priest was the only one permitted to enter "the second part" of the tabernacle – the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies – and even then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. When the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, he had to follow a rigid set of rules, which included a series of washings and a blood sacrifice as an atonement for his own sins and another for the sins of his fellow Israelites. Jesus fulfilled this annual ritual when He returned to His Father's heavenly throne room to offer His perfect sacrifice. A solid and meaningful link can be recognized therefore between these Day of Atonement services and the Wave Sheaf Offering (Leviticus 23:11-15).

The Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience—concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. (Hebrews 9:8-10)

The main points here is that, although the Aaronic high priests performed these Day of Atonement offerings every year, even they were not made perfect by their observance and repetition; neither was access granted to God's throne room for them nor for their Israelite brethren.

But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. (Hebrews 9:11)

Again, Jesus Christ is confirmed as the High Priest of the Melchizedek priesthood. He was and is the High Priest of the good things to come – the better things to come – the superior spiritual things to come... rather than the comparatively inferior things of the physical world, even including the building, utensils and rituals of the physical temple. He was and is the spiritual High Priest of the spiritual Melchizedek priesthood.

For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another. (Hebrews 9:24-25)

The Aaronic high priests entered the Most Holy Place of the temple every year on the Day of Atonement. Our great High Priest made just one special entrance into His Father's throne room in His heavenly palace. The Aaronic high priests sprinkled the blood of bullocks and goats – not their own blood – on the mercy seat each year. But our great High Priest allowed His own blood to be shed and He took it to His Father's throne room to present as His perfect offering.

And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins... For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:11, 14)

Almost sixteen hundred years of ministry and many thousands of offerings, which the Aaronic priests sacrificed were unable to take away the sins of the Israelites. They were symbolic images of Jesus' Melchizedek priesthood and of His one-time perfect sacrifice, which *was* able to take away sin.

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, (Hebrews 10:19-21)

The Aaronic high priest was a physical leader over the physical tabernacle, temples, priests, Levites and the citizens of Israel. Our great High Priest is the spiritual ruler (subject, of course, to His Father) over His Father's palace, throne room, lower-ranking priests and citizens of spiritual Israel – His church. Are God's people under a priesthood? Yes, we most certainly are. If Jesus Christ is the High Priest over the house of God, then the house of God is under the High Priest and is therefore under His priesthood.

This gives rise to more questions: Can the ministers of God's church be considered as lower-ranking priests in the Melchizedek priesthood? Can they be considered as having a certain level of rulership (though a lower level than Christ's, of course)? Is there any need to have a High Priest – a Leader – if there are no lower ranking priests for Him to lead and supervise? Let God's Word provide the answers:

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct... Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:7, 17)

Now let us look at the final "priesthood" verses in the epistle to the Hebrews:

For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. (Hebrews 13:11-16)

The bullocks and goats that were sacrificed for the annual Day of Atonement sin offerings were taken *outside* the tabernacle and *outside* the camp of Israel to be burnt (Leviticus 16:27). Likewise, it was necessary that Jesus' sacrifice took place *outside* the Jerusalem temple and even *outside* the city walls. The author of the book of Hebrews here urges Jesus' brothers and sisters to go to Him *outside* the restrictions of the physical temple and sacrificial law, which He has fulfilled, and to share the burden of His reproach. Physical Jerusalem is not the holy city. It is not our eternal home. Neither is the physical temple. Our citizenship is of the Kingdom of God, of which the New Jerusalem will be the capital (Revelation 3:12; 21:2).

The author also writes here that God's New Testament people still have priestly duties – sacerdotal duties – to perform. We are to offer the pleasing sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving, doing good deeds and works, regular communication with God and fellowship with one another.

Other New Testament priesthood scriptures

God still has a use for full-time human priests in His New Testament church:

You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; (I Peter 2:5 & 9)

The apostle Peter told the church members in the Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia congregations (I Peter 1:1) that they were members of a holy and royal priesthood at that time. Notice that the phrases "*are* being built up" and "*are* a chosen generation" were written in the present tense. Also, the apostle John told the members of the seven churches in Asia that God had made them and himself (Greek *hemas*: "us") priests:

And has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:6)

And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth. (Revelation 5:10)

He told them this twice, for emphasis. The phrases "has made us" and "have made us" in these two verses were written in the aorist tense. Although it is true that our rulership with Christ is yet in the future, the aorist tense in both of these verses proves that God's people have already been ordained as kings and priests. The aorist tense, according to Strong, is "generally rendered as a simple past tense in most translations" and "rendering an aorist by a simple English past tense should suffice in most cases."

Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Revelation 20:6)

This is the last "priesthood verse" in the Bible. It tells us that those who are blessed to have a part in the first resurrection will be priests of God the Father and of Jesus Christ. But does this future tense preclude God's children from being priests now? We have already seen in the three previous scriptures that it does not. Does the fact that God's people will be the children of God the Father in the World Tomorrow preclude the fact that we are His children now? Of course it does not.

When we examine the evidence, we can see that it weighs heavily in the favour of New Testament church members being priests of the Melchizedek order during our human lives. Also, just as there were different levels of priest in the Old Testament era, so it is today. The ministers of God's New Testament church are full-time priests of the Melchizedek order.

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