

## **Priests in Sacred Scripture: A Brief Overview by Rick McKinney, 2024**

Before there were anointed institutional priests there were patriarchal men acting as priests for their families or clans by making sacrifices and intercessions. In Sacred Scripture, after the flood, we read how Noah made burnt offerings on an altar he had built. We note how Abraham offered Isaac in sacrifice (Gen. 22), and we read about the sacrificial offerings by Jacob (Gen. 31:54, 35:14, 46:1) and others. This patriarchal order of the priesthood is similarly represented in the unusual story of Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who is also a priest of God Most High, and who brings out bread and wine and blesses Abraham who gave him a tithe or tenth of all the spoils he had taken after routing the kings who had taken captive his nephew, Lot, as well as the other inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 14:18-20). Scripture also speaks of pagan priests of Baal and other false gods (2 Kgs 23:4-20).

It was Moses, under God's direction, who established the Levitical priesthood, and anointed his brother, Aaron as the first priest, as well as Aaron's sons. As it is written, "You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and wash them with water. Then you shall take the vestments and put on Aaron the tunic and the robe of the ephod and the ephod and the breast piece and gird him with the decorated band of the ephod, and you shall set the turban on his head and put the holy diadem on the turban. You shall take the anointing oil and pour it on his head and anoint him. Then you shall bring his sons and put tunics on them, and you shall gird them, Aaron and his sons, with sashes and tie headdresses on them, and the priesthood shall be theirs by a perpetual ordinance. You shall then ordain Aaron and his sons" (Ex. 29:4-9).

The Hebrew priests (Hebrew *kohan*, Greek *hiereus*, and Latin *sacerdos*) from the tribe of Levi, faithfully performed their duties first in the tent of the Tabernacle and later in Temple of Jerusalem. Their duties included the offering of thanks, praise, prayers, and sacrifices, presiding at the designated Jewish holy days, teaching of the law to the people, and serving as examples of holy living (2 Ch. 23:6, 30:27 31:2, Eze. 22:26).

Historically the Temple was built during King Solomon's reign and completed around 957 B.C. The Babylonians destroyed that temple in 586 B.C., but under Persian rule it was rebuilt around 515 B.C., desecrated by the Greeks in 167 B.C., when a statue of Zeus was set up inside it, and was cleansed and rededicated in 164 B.C. by Judas Maccabeus which is celebrated at Hannukah. It was temporarily desecrated again under the Roman general Pompey who in 63 B.C. slaughtered the priests and entered the Holy of Holies but did not take any articles. The Temple was substantially expanded and rebuilt over many decades by King Herod (appointed under Roman rule) beginning in 20 B.C.

Finally, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish temple in 70 A.D. as Jesus prophesied, saying, "the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God" (Lk. 19:43-44). When the temple was destroyed the Levitical priesthood in the line of Aaron ceased to function, but the priesthood in the line of Melchizedek, now restored by Christ, our great high priest, continues in the priesthood of the Church to this day

Jesus, the Great High Priest (Heb. 4:14), is the one who renewed the order of priesthood in the line of Melchizedek through his own passion and sacrificial death and like Melchizedek, brought out bread and wine at His last supper and so established a continuing sacrifice through a priesthood begun through His apostles with the words, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me," and, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Lk. 22:19-20). The sacrificial Passover lamb and the rites of the Old Covenant are retired and transformed into the sacrificial body and blood of the Lamb of God in the New Covenant. Jesus also breathed upon the eleven disciples in an anointed way and said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn. 20:19-22).

In David's Messianic psalm, it is written, "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4), and in the Letter to the Hebrews it is stated that Melchizedek, "His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness'; next, he is also king of Salem, that is, 'king of peace'. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever" (Heb. 7:2-3). The letter notes that Jesus is the high priest in the line of Melchizedek (church priesthood) and supersedes the Levitical priesthood in the line of Aaron. Jesus himself quotes this psalm to proclaim that the Messiah is more than the son of David (Lk. 20: 41-44; see also Heb. 7; as well as Heb. 2:17, 3:1, 4:14-16, 5:1-10, and 6:19-20).

In the New Covenant the ordained church or ecclesial (Greek *ekklesia*, Latin *ecclesia*, and German *kirche*) order of priests (Greek *presbyteros*, Latin *presbyter*, and German *priester*) in the line of Melchizedek, serve along the side of the priesthood of all believers in Christ (1 Pt. 2:5, 2:9, Rev. 1:6, 5:10) who also offer praise, thanks, intercession (1 Tim. 2:1), and their lives laid down sacrificially (Rm. 12:1). In summary there are several kinds of priesthoods noted in Sacred Scripture including pagan, patriarchal, Melchizedek, Levitical, ecclesial (Melchizedek line renewed) and the priesthood of all believers.