The Levites and the Levitical Priesthood

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Sentinel: Widows Son
R.A.M. Chapter 10
Harlem, NY. October 11, 2015

It's said that the Levitical Priesthood began with Aaron, the older brother of Moses, (Exodus 28:1-3). Aaron's descendents served as the priests in Israel, ministering in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple, primarily as mediators between man and God. These Levitical priests bore the responsibility of offering the sacrifices required by the Mosaic Law. Some of the well-known priests in the Bible are Ezra; Eli; and Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

The term Levitical is derived from the tribe of Levi, 3rd son of Jacob and Leah, (Genesis 29: 34). It was from the 3 sons of Levi, Gershom/Gershon, Kohath, and Merari that the Levitical Priesthood actually traces itself through. And from the lineage of Kohath came Amram and as Kohath's first-born son, Amram was the father of Moses and Aaron. At the time that the Tabernacle began at Mt. Sinai in 1446 BC special duties were given to each of the 3 lines of Priests, however, only the sons of Aaron could offer animal sacrifices and incense. Descendants of Kohath, (Kohathites), they camped on the south side of the tabernacle and were responsible for the holy items such as the Ark of the Covenant, altars, lampstands, utensils with poles, etc., (Numbers 3:29-32). Although Kohathites, Moses, Aaron and their descendants they had special preeminence over the other families, and were called Aaronites. As such they were commanded to camp on the east side of the Tabernacle, the east side being the entrance to the Tabernacle and the Holy of Holies itself. Done, "thus to perform the duties of the sanctuary for the obligation of the sons of Israel," (Numbers 3:38). It should be also mentioned here that Moses was also considered a priest and functioned as the High Priest in three occasions all before the priesthood was consecrated to serve after the order of Aaron. These can be found described in Exodus 24; 22f and Leviticus 8, all involving duties of the priest, the consecration of the tabernacle and all found within, including Aaron and his sons.

Some Biblical commentators have stated that God chose the tribe of Levi to be his priests because they were obedient to God after the infamous golden calf incident at the foot of Mt. Sinai, (Exodus 32:26-29). However, God had made Levi's tribe priestly before that time, (Exodus 28:1-4). Although Jacob prophesized on his deathbed that Levi's descendants would be scattered throughout Israel, (Genesis 49:5-7); this was more like a curse than a Blessing. Saying he didn't want Levi or Simeon to be of his lineage or to represent him amongst the people, seeing them as vengeful and their vengeance evil. However, when this was fulfilled it was more an anointing than a curse as God appointed them as the Priestly Tribe, a consequence, that unlike the other tribes, Levi would have no land inheritance. But rather as The Almighty God, Blessed be He, made Levi's inheritance better than land – as it was God Himself whom the Levites inherited, (Numbers 18:20). God promised to provide for the Levites from the abundance of all the other tribes, (Numbers 18:8-14).

The Levites who were not priests were given various duties in the caretaking and protection of the Tabernacle, Temple and it's furnishings, (Numbers 3:21-26). Whereas,

the Priests among the Levites were given the immeasurable privilege of doing service in the Tabernacle, the Levitical priests also served as Judges, (Deuteronomy 17:8-13), and as teachers of God's law, (Deuteronomy 33:10).

Exodus 28 contains a detailed description of the garments God Commanded to be made and worn by the priests. These were "sacred garments," to bestow Aaron and his sons with dignity and honor, (Exodus 28:2). For the High Priest beginning with Aaron, God commanded him to wear "the breastplate of decision," to symbolize the representation of the people by the High Priest before God. On the left and right sides of the breastplate were the names of the 12 sons of Jacob, (12 tribes of Israel). Called the "breastplate of decision," because the Urim, (lights) and Thummim, (perfections), were associated with the breastplate and were used to determine God's will in various matters, (Exodus 28:29-30; Leviticus 8:8). While it's unclear whether the Urim and Thummim, were on, by, or in the High Priest's Ephod, no one knows exactly how they were used. The Bible does not give enough information. However, it aptly describes the Ephod.

Found described in Exodus 28:4; 29:5; 39:2; and Leviticus 8:7; the ephod is referred to in the priestly ordinances as the official dress of the High Priest. It was made of threads of, "blue and purple, of scarlet and fine twisted linen; embroidered in gold thread with cunning work." Held together by a girdle of similar workmanship sewed onto it, it had two, (2), shoulder pieces, which as the name implied crossed the shoulders and were fastened or sewed to the ephod in front. In dressing, the shoulder pieces were joined in the back to the two ends of the ephod. While nothing is mentioned about the length of the garment, at the point where the two shoulder pieces were joined together in the front, "above the girdle," two gold rings were sewed on, to which the breastplate was attached.

Consequently, some parts of the priestly garments were worn for safety, the High Priest was required to have gold bells attached to the hem of his garment, "so that the sound of the bells will be heard when he enters the Holy Place before the Lord and when he comes out so that he will not die," (Exodus 28:35). He also wore a Turban, plain white in color with a gold plate placed at the forehead inscribed with "Holiness to the Lord,)ליהוה קדש(, from the commandment that: "the gold plate would be on Aaron's head continuously so that, (the Children of Israel), will be acceptable to the Lord," (Exodus 28:38). This reminder of consecration, (being anointed), symbolized the importance of approaching the Lord God in holiness. All the garments worn by the Old Testament priests were symbolic of being set apart for God's work of atoning for sin. Compliance with the dress code was required, as stated in Exodus 28:43: "Aaron and his sons, (i.e. descendants), must wear [the garments] whenever they enter the tent of meeting or approach the altar to minister in the Holy Place, so that they will not incur guilt and die."

As the High Priest, he served as the supreme religious leader of the Israelites, (Numbers-18:7). As such, he performed only certain ministries. Found in the Books of 1 Chronicles 6:49; Leviticus 27:21 24:9; 1 Kings 8:6 and Exodus 25:22; however, the most important duty of the High Priest was conducting the Yom Kippur Service. As, only the High Priest could enter the Holy Place once a year on the Day of Atonement, known in Hebrew as Yom Kippur, (כפור יום). Offering sacrifices for all the people including himself, (Leviticus 4:3-21), done to make atonement for himself and the Israelites for all sins committed during the previous year, (Exodus 30:10). "The High Priest stood behind the veil before God and after making the Sin Sacrifices for himself and the people, he then brought the blood into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled it on the Mercy Seat, God's Throne," (Leviticus 16:14-15).

The Levitical Priesthood existed from the days of Aaron thru the days of the Sadducees. In the time of Christ, the Sadducees comprised most of the Priesthood and were known to be a wealthy class of people. The Sadducees did not believe in Resurrection, (Matthew 22:23), nor in any form of a spiritual realm in which angels and demons dwelled, (Acts 23:8). The High Priests Caiaphas and Annas were instrumental in the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, (John 18:13).

With the destruction of Herod's Temple and of Jerusalem between 66 and 70 CE, (AD), the 2nd Great Jewish Diaspora soon followed. Animal sacrifice ceased and was replaced in Judaism by religious observance and prayer. Today, only the Orthodox and Conservative Religious Movements in Judaism still believe in the division between Kohanim, (i.e. Levitical Priests), Levites and Israelites in religious observance such as, in the order of aliyot, (being called up to the Torah), or in certain obligations, some of these consist of Kohanim, being forbidden to be defiled by contact with the dead. In today's families for example, as a Kohen, only spouse, children, siblings, or parent's funerals a Kohen is permitted to attend or that of the abandoned dead. Another commandment is he must marry a daughter of a Kohen, (Bat Kohen), in order for his descendants, (sons and daughters), to remain Kohanim. He may also not marry a divorcee, or a woman who might have had a child out of wedlock, or a convert, etc. Claimed, all done in order to: keep the lineage descended from Aaron. Although, a daughter of a Kohen may marry an Israelite or Levite, but her child will then be an Israelite or a Levite. However, till the day she dies, she remains a daughter of a Kohen. The restriction is less on the woman in this sense because the tribe, (Cohen, Levi or Israelite), is claimed through the father; however the Jewishness of the child is determined maternally. Another is for the Redemption of the First-Born, a religious service from the bible in which the first born male in every "Israelite" family is redeemed from the obligation of the Priesthood and all the obligations of a priest: The service must be performed by a Kohen on the 30th day after a first-born male child's birth.

Whereas, we as believers in Christ however, are taught and believe that the Levitical Priesthood was not intended to be permanent, (Hebrews 7:11), the Ministry of Jesus as our High Priest is compared to be analogous to the Day of Atonement Service of the Blood in the Holy of Holies, (Hebrews 9:1-28). As the death of Christ put an end to the Old Covenant and the Levitical Priesthood as evidenced by the rending of the Temple veil, (Matthew 27:51), now Jesus Himself serves as the Greatest of the High Priests, (Hebrews 7:11-17). Since and through His Death and Resurrection, we Christians as His faithful are considered Priests; each of us are His Saints, (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:5; 2:9 and in Revelations 1:6 and 5:10). This is more a reference to how we live our lives, trying daily to live holy and Christ-like. Thus, today we have access to God's Presence, where we can freely enjoy Him forever, (Hebrews 6:19-20).

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