

The Aaronic Priesthood — a Biblical Analysis

The Biblical priesthood of Aaron consisted of the offices of priest and high priest. They are so thoroughly inter-connected, that we will need to consider them together. To provide a firm foundation for our discussion we will first examine their origin and function within Israel itself. Then we will see what the New Testament authors have to say about the priesthood of Aaron in the light of Christ. And, finally, we will draw conclusions regarding Joseph Smith's system in light of Christ as well.

The Aaronic Priesthood in the Old Testament

Three months after the Lord led the children of Israel out of Egypt, he led them to Mt. Sinai in the desolate Sinai peninsula (Ex. 19:1). During the next year the Lord spoke with Moses, giving him the Law, the pattern for the earthly tabernacle and designating His priests and servants. In Sinai, the Lord designated only Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, and his sons to be Israel's priests (Ex. 28:1). The rest of the Levities were set apart as Aaron's assistants to help him in the work of the tabernacle and to take care of its furnishings (Num. 3:5–10).¹ The work of the priests revolved around the morning and evening sacrifices offered on behalf of the community of Israel (Ex. 29:38–44), tending the vessels of the Holy Place (lampstand, altar of incense and bread of the Presence) (Ex. 27:20–21, 30:7,8; Lev. 24:5–9), the inspection of unclean persons, and when warranted declaring them clean (Lev. 13,14) and teaching the Law and administering justice under the Law (Deut. 17:8).

One of these priests was specially designated as the great, or high priest. This priest was distinguished from the other priests by his dress and function. In addition to supervising the other priests in the daily sacrifices and other work of the tabernacle, he was to offer a special "most holy" sacrifice on behalf of the people, which was to be preceded by a special sacrifice first for his own sin (Ex. 30:10; Lev. 9; 16). This most holy sacrifice was to be performed only once a year on what is known in Hebrew as Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the tenth day of the seventh month of Tishri (September–October) (Lev. 23:26–32). It was to atone for all of the sins of the entire Israelite community (Lev. 16:34).

Inside the tabernacle were two adjoining inner chambers separated by a heavy curtain, called the veil. The larger outer-most chamber was called the Holy Place, and contained the table for holding the bread of the Presence, the lampstand and the altar of incense. The smaller inner-most

1. Therefore, when the Bible speaks of the "Levitical priesthood," it is actually referring to the narrower lineage of Aaron and his sons within the tribe of Levi, the rest of the Levities being designated as his assistants.

chamber was called the Most Holy Place, or the Holy of Holies. It lay behind the veil and contained the ark of the covenant. The ark was comprised of a rectangular box with a lid which fit over its otherwise open top. This lid is referred to as the atonement cover, and had a cherub at each end facing each other. The central area between these cherubim is the mercy seat. The ark contained the Testimony, the stone tablets on which were etched the ten commandments. It was directly above the mercy seat, between the cherubim that the Lord Himself appeared in a cloud, and thereby took up residence within Israel.² The Most Holy Place was the abode of the Heavenly Father alone.

The high priest was the only person ever allowed behind the veil into the Most Holy Place, and that only one time per year on the Day of Atonement. At that time he would take blood from the most holy sacrifice into the Most Holy Place, and there sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover of the ark, thereby atoning for all of the sin of the entire Israelite community. While every priest was to participate in the offering of daily sacrifices, and to tend the Holy Place, only the high priest was ever allowed to enter the Most Holy Place.

Aaron himself was designated by the Lord to be the first such great, or high priest. Upon Aaron's death, the Lord designated Eleazar his son to succeed him (Num. 20:25–29). And so by the decree of the Lord, Israel's priesthood, including the special office of high priest, was to continue through the descendants of Aaron.

The Aaronic Priesthood in the Light of Christ

The New Testament is clear that (1) the Aaronic, or Levitical priesthood is an inseparable part of the Mosaic Law and (2) the Mosaic Law, together with its Levitical priesthood, was completely abolished through the perfect atonement of Jesus Christ.

We have seen above that the Lord gave the Law to Israel at Mt. Sinai, and at the same time established a priesthood in Aaron's lineage for its administration. Without the priesthood the Law would have had no means of administration; and without the Law the priesthood would have had nothing to administer. The Levitical priesthood, then, is an absolutely integral part of the Mosaic Law.³ The author of Hebrews makes this clear when he says, "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law" (Heb. 7:11–12).

This Mosaic law, including its tabernacle, priesthood and sacrificial system, was actually a 1400-year-long picture-drama of what would one day be ultimately accomplished for us by Jesus Christ, now a lesson-book for all the nations to behold. Our author confirms this as he continues.

"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered?...Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same

2. Ex. 25:17–22; Lev. 16:2.

3. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 166.

sacrifices, which can never take away sins. *But when this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*” (Heb. 10:1–2a, 11–14, emphasis mine)

This is further confirmed by the apostle Paul when writing to the Colossians. “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. *These [laws] are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ*” (Col. 2:16–17, emphasis mine).

What happens to shadows once the realities arrive in the perfect light of day? They simply disappear. Their function has been fulfilled, they have served their purpose and they are no longer needed. They served their function as a 1400-year-long arrow pointing to the perfect work that Jesus would one day accomplish on the cross for our sins, “once, for all time” (see Heb. 10:14). Consequently, the Mosaic law, *including its integral Levitical priesthood*, was completely and forever annulled by Jesus’ perfect and completed work on the cross on our behalf. In reality, it simply doesn’t exist anymore. This is what allows our author to say,

“The former regulation [Mosaic law] is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.” (Heb. 7:18)

“By calling this covenant [in Jesus] ‘new,’ he [God] has made the first one [Mosaic law] obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.” (Heb. 8:13)

“He [God] sets aside the first [covenant—the Mosaic law] to establish the second [covenant—in Jesus]. And by [God’s] will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb. 10:9b–10)

This is confirmed again by the apostle Paul in Romans and Colossians. “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4).⁴ “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, *having canceled the written code [Mosaic law], with its regulations, that was against us...he took it away, nailing it to the cross*” (Col. 2:13–14, emphasis mine).

Since God set aside the Mosaic law in favor of a superior covenant through Jesus, any attempt to return to that old order of things represents open contempt for His perfect and completed work. “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised [a requirement of the Mosaic law], *Christ will be of no value to you at all*. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. *You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace*” (Gal. 5:2–4, emphasis mine).

4. The precise meaning of Paul’s statement here has long been a matter of debate within the Christian church. The debate revolves primarily around the intended meaning of the word “end.” The Greek word here is *telos*, and like its English counterpart “end” may connote both a sense of “termination or cessation,” and that of “goal or consummation.” It may well be impossible (and unnecessary) to decide on only one of these senses to the exclusion of the other. In reality, Christ was both the goal and consummation of the law *as well as* its reason for ceasing. For a thorough discussion of these issues see James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary, vol 38b, Romans 9–16*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), pp. 589–591, 596–598.

Summary and Conclusion

God designated Israel's priesthood to function as an integral part of the Law He gave to Moses at Mt. Sinai. This priesthood was held first by Moses' brother Aaron and his sons, and was passed on only to Aaron's descendants within the larger tribe of Levi (hence the common designation "Levitical priesthood"). Aaron was the first of these priests to be designated the great, or high priest. The New Testament tells us that the Mosaic law, including its sacrificial system and officiating Levitical priesthood, was only a shadow of the superior work which Christ would ultimately do for us. It also tells us that the Law was completely abolished by this perfect and completed work of Christ on the cross. Furthermore, it tells us that any effort to revive the old order of things represented by the Mosaic law—in any way—displays open contempt for Christ and results in alienation from Him.

We conclude, therefore, that God could never have authored a revival or "restoration" of the Aaronic, or Levitical priesthood within the Christian church. To do so would be to cast aspersions on the perfect work He had already accomplished through Jesus. Indeed, evidence from both the New Testament and church history confirm that no such priesthood order existed in the early Christian church. Once again, we hold Joseph Smith and his accomplices guilty—this time of contempt for the perfect work of Christ by seeking to revert to the old order of things represented by the Mosaic law and its Levitical priesthood. And just as in the case of the Melchizedek priesthood discussed earlier, they compounded their sin by setting up a system whereby others would share, albeit ignorantly, in their same disgrace.