

## Study 0047

### Scripture Text: Exodus 28:1-43; 29:1-37; 40:12-15, 31-32

Having described the sanctuary which God wanted built by the children of Israel, He went on to describe and explain a very critical aspect of worship in the sanctuary; this was the priesthood. The priesthood is an expression which speaks collectively of the priests of God in the Old Covenant Era.

### The Old Covenant Era: The Priesthood

The priesthood was essentially two groups—the high priest, who was the head of the priests, and all the other priests. A third group which was the Levites, was usually confused with the priests, but the Levites were not priests, rather, they were those who assisted the priests in the performance of their duties or ministry in the outer court, and, in the packing and transportation of the items of the sanctuary when the children of Israel were journeying from place to place in the wilderness. All the priests and Levites were of one lineage—the lineage of Levi. The priests were, however, male members of the house or lineage of Aaron; the high priest being the eldest surviving son of that lineage. Thus, in the Old Covenant Era, the priesthood was strictly a family affair, and God was the One Who chose the family. Every male descendant of the lineage of Aaron was thus automatically a priest, and could not avoid the call to service, except he had a physical defect; thus signifying the requirement of holiness for all those who would enter into the priesthood in the Old Covenant Era (**Leviticus 21:16-23**).

The priests, including the high priest, all functioned as ministers to God (**Exodus 28:1**). They were essentially, intermediaries between God and the people; although the high priest was more than just an intermediary; he was the mediator between God and His people. The priests also taught the people how to approach God and how to walk with Him in their daily lives, by teaching them the Laws of God (**Leviticus 10:9-11; 2 Chronicles 15:3-6; 17:7-11**). They also taught the people the difference between what was holy and what was not; and what was clean and what was not. Furthermore, the priests could be said to be the worship leaders in the Old Covenant Era, as they led the people to worship God by bringing them to the place of cleansing from sin (through the sacrificial offerings for sin and trespass), by helping the people to offer their burnt, thank/peace and meat/grain offerings at the altar of burnt offering, and, by presenting their offering of prayers, praise, and appreciation to God at the altar of incense, while the worshipper stood at the door of the tabernacle.

Besides the daily responsibilities of ministry of the priests in the tabernacle, the priests also functioned as judges (**Deuteronomy 17:8-13; 2 Chronicles 19:8-11**), adjudicating over civil and religious matters, as well as over matters of dispute among the people. In this way, they could adjudge a man clean or unclean (and therefore fit or unfit to worship God); they could adjudge a sacrifice acceptable or unacceptable after inspecting the animal for blemishes or spot (**Malachi 1:6-14**); and, they maintained God's Laws and judgments over the nation.

The high priest had a special role besides all the general functions of the priests. He was the only one who was authorized to make atonement for the sins of the people and for his own sins, once a year before God, on the Day of Atonement. He was the only one who could enter into the most holy place, and thereby mediate between God and the nation. He was also the only one who had on him the Urim and Thummim with which the will of God was made known to the nation (**Exodus 28:30; Numbers 27:18-21; 1 Samuel 23:9-15**). It was therefore expected that his life would be above board including his home life, as well as the

life of his children. He was not permitted to marry certain women, and was not permitted to mourn the loss of a loved one. In fact, he was not allowed to touch or even go near any dead thing; even a loved one (**Leviticus 21:10-15**). God was showing by this, not only His holiness through the high priest, but also that He is a God of the living not of the dead!

In the course of describing the priesthood, God required that special clothing be made to distinguish the priests and high priest from the ordinary people (**Exodus 28:1**). This special clothing carried greater significance than just distinguishing the priests from the rest of the people. All the priests were to wear a robe, with a sash to hold the robe in place, as well as put on a headdress on their heads (**Exodus 28:40**). In addition to these items of clothing, the high priest's clothing was very special (**Exodus 28:4-39**). His clothing included a chest-piece (breastplate of judgment) with a pouch into which he put the Urim and Thummim close to his heart, and on which were attached twelve (12) different gem stones, one for each tribe of Israel which was worn over an ephod; an ephod was made of two pieces of cloth joined at the shoulders by two pieces of gem stones, with the names of the twelve tribes engraved on them, and was linked at the base (the high priest's waist) by a rope; a robe made of blue, was worn before putting on the ephod. To the hem of the robe, were attached pomegranates and golden bells alternately all around. Then, there was the sash which went round the waist of the high priest, and a special headgear with an inscription affixed—HOLINESS TO THE LORD. The clothing of the high priest was for glory and for beauty (**Exodus 28:2**); which meant bringing dignity and honour to the Office of the high priest as a reflection of the God he served. The high priest's clothing also showed him as the burden bearer of God's people—bearing their burdens on his shoulders (**Exodus 28:12; 39:7**), bearing their names on his chest (his heart) always before the LORD (**Exodus 28:29**), and bearing the guilt of their sins on his head (**Exodus 28:39**). The pomegranate and golden bells which tinkled as the high priest moved around in the most holy place, announced to God that he was in the most holy place, and was therefore not killed. Beneath all these items of clothing was a very significant and special item of clothing, the linen breaches (more like an underwear), which every priest (including the high priest) had to put on to cover their nakedness, before even putting on any of the specially made items of clothing. This one piece prevented the priests from guilt and death while they ministered in the tabernacle (**Exodus 28:42-43**). This is like the righteousness which God imputes on the believer in Christ today, without which no man can minister before God, otherwise, he is struck dead (physically and spiritually).

In contrast to the pre- and post-Flood Eras, the Old Covenant Era worship was quite elaborate, and created a division of labour. In the previous Eras, the head of the household who stood at the altar was like the priest and high priest all rolled in one, whereas, in the Old Covenant Era, there was a separation of the two functions. Furthermore, in the previous Eras, only one altar was essential and no more, but in the Old Covenant Era, beside the brazen altar, and the altar of incense, there was also the holy of holies, and the other items of furniture before which the priests ministered unto God. One very significant aspect of the clothing of the priests was that it was provided for by God. This means that the priests were clothed by God Himself, making it a spiritual matter. Another significant aspect of the Old Covenant Era priests' clothing was that it covered every part of their flesh, except for the face, the hands and the feet. These exposed parts were however, smeared with blood and anointing oil during the consecration of the priests; thus, the work of ministry in the tabernacle was not one of the flesh but of the Spirit of God. We also see God's attention to dealing with sin in the life of the priests before their consecration.

## **EXERCISE**

Please state true or false to the statements below:

1. We can say that in the Old Covenant Era, without the priests there really could be no worship.
2. The Levites were priests in a sense.
3. The priesthood was a family affair—the family of Levi.
4. The high priest was the chief of all the priests.
5. The high priest can be likened to a senior pastor, an arch-bishop or the pope today.
6. Priests functioned as teachers and judges in the Old Covenant Era.
7. Linen breaches were worn by the priests so that they would not catch a cold.
8. The clothing of the high priest was to show off the affluence attached to that Office.
9. The priests' clothing signified that ministering to God in the Old Covenant Era was a spiritual matter.
10. The Urim and Thummim which all the priests had on them was for inquiring of God.
11. All the priests in the Old Covenant Era were essentially burden bearers of the nation.
12. One of the most significant functions of the high priest was performed on the Day of Atonement.