

## THE PRIESTHOOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

---

JEROME McCANN, O.P.



THE MOST profound expression of divine worship is the offering of sacrifice. In essence, sacrifice imports oblation and immolation. The offering of some fitting, concrete object as a gift to God is called oblation; the act of the offerer in making this object a victim in place of himself in acknowledgment of God's absolute majesty is immolation. Rightly, it has been said that "sacrifice is not oblation plus immolation but immolative oblation." The object offered is something belonging to the offerer which, through a real or symbolic destruction, is taken away from his dominion. The essence of religion demands some such external manifestation of the inner sentiments of the soul. The acknowledgment of God's absolute majesty and the submission thereto normally find their expression in the soul by acts of adoration, thanksgiving, petition, and atonement. Sacrifice represents these sentiments by symbolic actions in the offering and destruction of the object.

Since sacrifice presupposes ministers of sacrifice or priests, the priesthood in one form or another has been a part of human culture from time immemorial. The notions of sacrifice and ministers of sacrifice are to be found in almost every pagan cult known to historians. There seems to be some inward force, impressed by nature, in the heart of man that demands worship to a deity, whether it be God Himself or one of the gods that human ingenuity must invent to satisfy this restless urge. Implicit in these endeavors of all people to offer sacrifice is man's unmistakable realization of his own inadequacy and his acknowledgment of a "providence" governing his life.

The first detailed knowledge we have of a priesthood is that of the Semitic peoples whom God had chosen from among the nations of the earth. The Mosaic Law clearly outlined the laws of sacrifice and the priesthood in three books of the Old Testament: Leviticus, Exodus, and Numbers. Even before the time of this institution and execution of the liturgical life of the Israelites, there was some system of sacrifice and a priesthood. We

know from the Book of Genesis (4:3; 8:20; 33:20; 35:1) and from the Book of Exodus (17:15; 24:6; 29:1) that in the beginning everyone was the minister of his own sacrifice. Evident examples are Cain and Abel, Noe, Jacob, and Moses. We read that each of the three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob offered sacrifice to God.

Altars, literally "places of sacrifice," were constructed not only in spots sanctified by a divine vision but also where no such vision is recorded to have occurred. There is no indication of the nature of the victims to be sacrificed except in the case of the ram offered in place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13). This same passage is the single instance where details of a ritual can be found in the pre-Mosaic worship. Abraham placed the wood on the altar, and then, having tied Isaac, placed him on the fire-wood. Ordinarily Isaac would have been slain and the wood set afire had not the Angel of God intervened. In some passages only the construction of the altar is mentioned and the sacrifices themselves are left to be understood. There is one instance (Gen. 46:1) where Jacob is said to have offered sacrifices without mention of an altar. Often prayer is mentioned in connection with an altar (Gen. 12:8; 26:25; 33:20), but there is no indication whether it was prayer of adoration, praise or petition. The purpose of these sacrifices is not mentioned. The acknowledgment of God's supreme dominion is obvious in the sacrifice of Isaac, while the prohibition of human sacrifice is implicit.

#### THE TRIBE OF LEVI

In time the tribe of Levi alone was elected by God to provide ministers for the public worship offered to Him by the Jewish nation. The reason for this election is hidden in God's unfathomable Wisdom. Certainly we gather from the death-bed homily of Jacob that Levi was an unfaithful son, cursed by his father for the crime of murder and excessive cruelty to an animal. The oldest son of Jacob, Ruben, because of the abomination that he committed with his father's concubine, had forfeited his birthright to the double portion of supremacy and the priesthood. As a result the supremacy was given to Judah; the priesthood to Levi. The history of the Levites threads its way through the pages of the Old Testament and records both their fidelity and infidelity toward God. During the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the sons of Levi were the first to go over to the side of Moses after he threw down the golden calf. They marched through the

camp and slew the idolaters as Moses commanded, winning his blessing and consecrating their hands to God by this deed.

The cult worship, together with the ministerial offices, was communicated to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Not all the members of the tribe were to share in the same degree in the worship to God. The priesthood was given exclusively to Aaron and his male heirs; the other members of the tribe were to serve as ministers of the priests. Aaron and his immediate successors were appointed to the high priesthood and thus a threefold distinction existed within the tribe. First, were the Levites, the non-priestly members, who were to act as assistants to the priests. Secondly, were the priests who comprised all the male descendants of Aaron. Thirdly, was the high priest, Aaron, and the first-born of his descendants in each generation. The threefold division of the tribe corresponded with the threefold division of the tabernacle; the Levites were allowed to enter only the inner court; the priests could also perform the sacred offices in the Holy Place; but the high priest alone could enter the Holy of Holies.

#### THE SIMPLE LEVITES

The non-priestly members of the tribe of Levi were composed of the descendants of Levi's sons Gerson, Caath, and Merari. They were Israel's gift to Aaron and to his sons, and were to assist them in the functions of the worship of the One True God by performing whatever duties were not reserved to the priests. The single consecration of the Levites to God was conferred prior to the departure from Mt. Sinai. God commanded Moses to take them from the midst of the children of Israel and cleanse them by sprinkling them with the water of purification. Following the sprinkling, they shaved off their hair and washed their garments. According to God's instruction they were to make an offering of two oxen; one as a sin-offering, the other as a holocaust. Then Moses brought them before the Tabernacle and called together all the children of Israel. While the representatives of the nation laid their hands upon the Levites, Aaron offered them in the sight of God as a gift from Israel. In the place of the first-born Israelites who according to Numbers (3:13; 8:17) were especially dedicated to God, He accepted the Levites. Exercising an office which apparently was hereditary, they alone were to serve in the Tabernacle, but could enter only to the inner court. Anyone else approaching or presuming to enter the tabernacle would bring plague upon the nation.

The sons of Caath were assigned to carry the Ark, the table, the candlesticks, the altar of incense, the altar of sacrifice, and the laver with its vessels. The simple Levites could not touch nor even see these until the priestly members of the tribe had first prepared them for transportation. The sons of Gerson transported the hangings of the tent and the court, as well as the curtain hanging at the entrance of the court around the tabernacle and around the altar. The Merarites were responsible for the framework of the tabernacle, the pillars, boards, bars, sockets, and cords. Ithamar, son of Aaron, was overseer of both the Gersonites and the Meraraites, while Elezar, another son of Aaron, was overseer of the sons of Caath.

During the last years of David's reign there was a complete re-organization of the Levites. A census was taken which became the basis for a new distribution of offices. Twenty-four thousand of the tribe were selected and appointed for the ministry. Their offices were to care for the sacred vessels and treasures, to bring in the first fruits and tithes, to prepare the showbreads and cakes used at the sacrifices, and, when there was a shortage of priests, to kill the paschal lamb for those who were legally unclean. Since the Israelites were now settled in the land of Canaan, the transportation of the Ark was not one of the duties after this time. Six thousand of the Levites at the time of this census were assigned as overseers and judges; four thousand were to be porters; finally, four thousand, singers and musicians.

The Levites had no territorial boundaries assigned to them after the conquest of Canaan. Thirty-five towns were allotted to them in the territories of the other tribes. They earned their livelihood from the cattle they were allowed to keep as well as from the tithes of all the fields, gardens, and herds of Israel. However, a tenth of their tithe had to be handed over to the priests. Failure to comply meant guilt and liability to the death penalty.

#### THE PRIESTS

The Divine selection of Aaron and his sons for the office of priesthood is first recorded in the twenty-eighth chapter of Exodus. While the unique office of high priest is not explicitly mentioned here, it can be inferred from the specific difference of vestments indicated for Aaron. Aaron was a member of the Caath branch of the tribe of Levi. He had four sons of whom only two, Elezar and Ithamar, actually were to be the progenitors of the Levitical priesthood, since the two other sons, Hadab and Abiu,

were struck dead after their careless offering of "strange fire." Consequently we see that the office of the priesthood was to be conferred solely upon the descendants of Eleazar and Ithamar. No one else in all of Israel could aspire to the priesthood.

Thus of the multiple requirements for the priesthood in the Old Testament, the very first one was the absolute necessity of descendancy from Aaron. Registers were scrupulously compiled and maintained for this purpose and their importance was emphasized when, after the exile, certain priests who were unable to prove their right to perform the sacred functions were excluded from the priesthood. No definite age for a priest was prescribed in the legislation, but the presumption is that it was the same as that of the simple Levites, i.e., from twenty-five to fifty years of age. Bodily defects were grounds for suspension from office although the priestly income was not lost. Marriage of priests was limited to Hebrew virgins or widows, while the high priest could marry only a Hebrew virgin. During their performance of the sacred liturgy, abstinence from wine and other intoxicating beverages as well as separation from their wives was imposed upon the priests. The high priest could never touch a dead body; the other priests could touch only the dead bodies of their nearest kin. Many other regulations concerning food and general behavior at funerals, most of which were intended to preserve legal cleanness, were part of the requirements of this priesthood.

God's instructions for the priestly consecration of Aaron and his sons are found in the twenty-ninth chapter of Exodus, and in the eighth chapter of Leviticus we see them carried out. Some indication of the importance and sacredness of God's priesthood can be gleaned from an examination of these texts. The sublime rite of consecration began with Moses' leading Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the Tabernacle while the whole nation of Israel followed. Bringing the sacred vestments, the oil of anointing, the young bull for the sin-offering, the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread, Moses immediately offered Aaron and his sons to God. Then followed the washing of Aaron and his sons, symbolizing their inward purification. Moses invested Aaron first as the high priest followed by the anointing of the tabernacle and the pouring of oil on Aaron's head. The priests were anointed on the forehead only. After Aaron and his sons had laid their hands on the head of the bull, it was slain as a sin-offering. Moses immolated the fatty parts of this victim on the altar, while the remainder of the bull with its skin, the flesh, and the entrails he

burned outside the camp as God had commanded. Ordinarily the flesh of the sin-offering was eaten by the priests but since it represented their own sins on this occasion, it was omitted. The blood was poured out at the base of the altar and on the horns. One of the rams was then offered as a holocaust. The ritual of imposition of hands, the slaughter of the animal, the dissection of it into parts, the washing of the entrails and feet, and the whole burning of the holocaust upon the altar, were the chief aspects of the burnt-offering. After the immolation of the animal, Moses touched the right ear, the right thumb, and the right big toe of Aaron and his sons with the blood of this victim. Part of this blood was mixed with the oil of anointing and sprinkled on Aaron and his sons as well as on their vestments. The right shoulder of the ram, together with the fatty parts, and a loaf of unleavened bread, a cake tempered with oil, as well as a wafer were placed in the hands of Aaron and his sons who offered them to the Lord. Moses received them from their hands and burned them on the altar of holocaust. The sacrificial meal followed the rite of consecration. Aaron and his sons were obliged to stay seven days in the tabernacle during which the consecration ceremony was repeated each day. Thus they became purified and fit to enter upon the priestly office. On the eighth day Aaron together with his sons solemnly offered the first sacrifices. After Moses led Aaron into the tabernacle (but not into the Holy of Holies), God manifested His divine acceptance of the events with a fire that consumed the holocaust and fat on the altar. Shortly after this, the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abiu, offered the strange fire and were struck dead by God.

St. Thomas writes (I-II, Q. 102, a. 5, ad 8 & 9) that the pouring of the oil on the head of Aaron was to signify that the power of consecration was poured forth by him unto the others, just as the oil flows from the head unto the lower parts of the body. The ear, thumb, and toe were tinged with blood to indicate that they should obediently follow the law in offering the sacrifices, while the sprinkling of their persons and vestments with blood was in memory of the blood of the lamb by which the Israelites were delivered in Egypt. In memory of Aaron's treachery in making the golden calf during their sojourn at Mt. Sinai, the young bull was sacrificed as a sin-offering. The first ram was offered as a holocaust in memory of Abraham's sacrifice, which obedience to God the high priest was to imitate; the second ram, to commemorate again their delivery out of Egypt. The basket of bread was

in memory of the manna in the desert. St. Thomas Aquinas proposes here that the figurative meaning of these rites was that those who are consecrated to the spiritual ministry of Christ should first of all be purified by the waters of Baptism, and by the waters of tears, in their faith in Christ's passion, which is a sacrifice of both expiation and purification. They should be ornamented with virtues, consecrated with the oil of the Holy Spirit and with the sprinkling of Christ's blood.

The sacrifices offered by the priests of the Old Testament were either bloody or unbloody. The first of the bloody sacrifices was the holocaust or burnt-offering. Only an unblemished male of the ovine or bovine species was the victim of the holocaust. The victim was led by the one offering it to the threshold of the tabernacle. He laid his hands on the head to symbolically identify himself with the animal and to express adoration, thanksgiving, petition, and atonement which made the sacrifice pleasing to God. The one who offered the victim slayed the animal, removed the skin, and cut the carcass into pieces. After the entrails and the legs were cleaned, the offerer handed the victim over to the priest who placed it upon the fire of the altar and poured the blood around over the altar. The victim was totally consumed by the fire, except for the skin which was given to the priest. The odor of the burning animal symbolically signified the acceptance of God. There was a minor variation in the ritual for the offering of a sheep or an ox. Turtle-doves and pigeons were acceptable in case of poverty. The holocaust was to be uninterrupted, with a lamb being offered twice each day, morning and evening, and with the fire on this altar burning day and night (Lev. 6:9-13). With every holocaust there was a food and drink offering, the materials and quantity of which varied according to the animal sacrificed (Num. 15: 1-12).

The second of the bloody sacrifices was sin and guilt offerings. These were both expiatory and the difference between them is difficult to determine with certainty. Apparently the sin offering was offered by the individual Israelite to remove uncleanness or to atone for some personal sin that was committed without guilt, since deliberate grievous sins were punishable with death. The guilt offering was made when the rights or property of another were injured, whether it was a neighbor or God.

The third of the bloody sacrifices was the peace offering. Every animal whether male or female that was fit for sacrifice could be used. The breast and the right hind leg were separated

from the rest of the animal. The breast was offered to God by a ceremony called "waving" by which the priest placed the sacrifice in the hands of the offerer and then made a horizontal movement forwards and backwards towards the sanctuary. A similar sort of ceremony was performed with the right hind leg except that the movement was vertical. These two pieces belonged to the priest as his share of the sacrifice. The remainder of the peace offering was eaten by the offerer and his family in a sacrificial banquet to which the Levites, or even widows, orphans, and the poor were invited. This meal occurred near the sanctuary and represented God as the host and those eating the meal as His guests. It was a symbol and pledge of their mutual friendship, a type of the Blessed Eucharist.

The unbloody sacrifices were the complement of the bloody sacrifices. The material of these were salt, wine, grain, oil, and incense. The grain offerings were prepared in a variety of forms. Part of the offering was burnt together with all of the incense. The remainder belonged to the priest. No layman could eat of these sacrifices since their dedication to God sealed them with a certain sacredness. These types of sacrifice were offered twice each day by the high priest for himself and the entire priesthood. The first sheaves of grain and two loaves of bread from the new harvest were offered at special times prescribed by the Law. Salt was the indispensable ingredient in all sacrificial offerings. Besides the ordinary effect of making the sacrificial meal more palatable, salt symbolized the inviolability of God's covenant with the Jewish people. This latter signification had its origin in nomadic times when the custom of eating of the same meal or taking salt together indicated a preserving bond of friendship.

#### THE HIGH PRIEST

The high priest was the priest par excellence. In addition to the duty which every priest had of offering sacrifice, the high priest had other duties that indicated his supremacy in the Levitical priesthood. The office of high priest was only implicitly indicated in Exodus. However, the evidence of Aaron's pre-eminence in the rite of consecration makes the fact clear. Since the ninth chapter of Leviticus narrates the special ceremony of the introduction of Aaron into the inner sanctuary where Moses apparently invested him with further priestly powers, the high priesthood was a special office. After this rite, Moses and Aaron blessed the people while the pleasure of God manifested itself in

the sight of all in the form of a fire consuming all the offerings upon the altar.

The vestments common to all priests were the long white linen robe, somewhat like our present-day alb, a girdle of linen and a turban of linen. In addition to these, the high priest had a mitre of blue, and fastened to his head was a gold plate engraved with the words: "Holy to the Lord." The tunic of the high priest was blue and of woven work, forming part of the ephod, and having a border of pomegranates in blue, red, and crimson, with golden bells between them, which tinkled at his every movement. The ephod or scapular consisted of two parts, one covering the back, the other the front. These were clasped together on the shoulder with two large onyx stones, each having engraved on it six names of the tribes of Israel. The ephod in its size and shape resembled a dalmatic. From his neck was suspended the breastplate or rational, a square of one span, doubled like a burse, and made of the same material as the ephod. On the outer side were set four rows of precious stones, three in a row, each with the name of one of the tribes. A golden ring was on each corner. The top two rings each had a twisted chain-cord of pure gold with a clasp to attach it to the shoulder straps of the ephod. The bottom two rings had cords of violet by which the rational was attached to the bottom of the shoulder straps of the ephod. Inside this breastplate were kept the mysterious Urim and Thummim by which God communicated His infallible answers to the high priest upon questions of great importance. Just what these particular objects were or how they were used is unknown and can only serve as matters of speculation.

The most exalted duty of the high priest was to enter the Holy of Holies once a year, on the feast of the Atonement, and expiate for the sins of the entire nation. He alone was responsible for the divine cult as well as the direction of the whole Levitical priesthood. Another of his special obligations was to seek the will of God by means of the Urim and Thummim. He also was to render the final judgment in matters pertaining to justice as well as to preside over the Sanhedrin in a later period of history. Finally he was to anoint the new king.

#### CONCLUSION

The Levitical priesthood was a shadow of the priesthood of the New Testament. Yet, sanctity and holiness of life is the common feature of both. The priestly ministry requires something of

kinship to God. In this the priests of the Old and the New Testaments were similar, but the priests of the Old acquired this holiness through means that were predominantly exterior, whereas the priests of the New become sanctified through means principally interior. However, neither priesthood excluded the interior and exterior observances that bring this holiness.

In chapter twenty-one and twenty-two in the Book of Leviticus the holiness of priests of the Old Law is laid down in ordinances governing their domestic life (Lev. 21:1-15), and the discharge of their priestly duties (Lev. 21:16; 22:16.) These general regulations deal with the behavior of the priests regarding death. Priests are not to touch a dead body, except for their nearest blood relatives such as father, mother, brother, son, etc. Contact with a dead body incurred an uncleanness that remained seven days. Ministry in the Tabernacle or Temple demanded ceremonial cleanness. Priests are forbidden to mourn for anyone except those who live in the same house with them. Superstitious practices such as shaving of the forehead or beard, were forbidden by God. Wives and daughters of the priests must be women whose character is above suspicion. There were also some analogous regulations pertaining to the high priest which were stricter and significant of the higher degree of sanctity of his office. He was not permitted to mourn even for his parents. He could not go out of the sanctuary where he lived or officiated since on his return he would defile the place. If he did not marry a Hebrew virgin, his children would be unholy.

The physical disqualifications for the Jewish priesthood were considered in the manner of our own canonical impediments and have been treated in the section concerning priests. Chapter twenty-two indicates the ceremonial disqualifications that prevent a priest from partaking of a sacrificial meal. When a holy offering is ceremonially impure, he must not touch it; otherwise his transgression would be punished by degradation. This impurity was based on sanitary grounds, on a sense of natural aversion, and, to some extent, on religious considerations. Any animal that died a natural death or was injured by another animal could not be eaten without incurring uncleanness.

And so through the centuries from the day of Aaron's solemn consecration to the priestly office, the priests of the Old Testament offered sacrifices daily to the One True God. The yearning of the Chosen People for the promised Messiah throbbed above the great unfinished music of the psalms, while their priests

slayed sacrificial victims and offered sacrifices morning and evening to Yahweh, beseeching Him to hasten the day of liberation and to have mercy on Israel. Then came the Roman domination. Herod divided Israel among his sons. Before long a Roman procurator replaced one of them. The Israelite nation was crumbling as Vespasian and Titus waged a relentless war. The holy city of Jerusalem struggled to survive, as a great part of the Chosen People gathered within the safety of her walls. Soon the Romans breached these walls. The only sanctuary remaining was that of the Temple. Here the heart of Israel beat out its final rhythm of life. The last sacrifice of the Old Law to be offered by the Levitical priesthood was performed on the evening of the 16th of July, 70 A.D. The next day, the daily sacrifice offered to Yahweh was omitted because there were not enough men. From that day to this, the Chosen People have not offered up the sacrifices. The Levitical priesthood together with the Old Law is silent now. For a brief span of years the two priesthoods existed side by side until the shadow of the Levitical priesthood gave way to the reality of the Christian priesthood.