

# THE PRIESTHOOD

By Mike Burnham

## Exodus 28:1

Before we look at the High Priest I think it would be beneficial to briefly look at the *priesthood*.

The priesthood, like the tabernacle, is inexhaustible in its types and symbolic meaning, from the services performed to the clothes that are worn. The Tabernacle, with all of its beautiful furnishings, was inaccessible and of no benefit to the Israelites apart from the priesthood. Because they were unable to serve in the Tabernacle, they needed a mediating priest, someone to represent them before God. It was for this purpose that God called Aaron and his sons.

The concept of a priesthood did not originate with the nation of Israel. During the patriarchal period, the head of each household functioned as a mediating priest on behalf of his family (Job 1:5; Noah Gen. 8:20; Abraham 12:7-8; Isaac 26:25; Jacob 33:20).

Israel was to be a *kingdom of priests* and a *holy nation* having direct access to God, but this priesthood was conditional (Exo. 19:4-6). But Israel sinned against God, breaking the covenant that He had made with them at Mount Sinai. They forfeited the privilege of being a kingdom of priests. It therefore became necessary for God to institute a priesthood from among the people to represent the nation of Israel before Him. That is what we have before us in the opening verse. The Aaronic priesthood continued until the death of Christ in the days of Caiaphas, the High Priest. Then it ended, for Christ passed within the veil and sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high as the *Great High Priest* and took upon Himself the ministry of intercession for His own.

There are some parallels between the Aaron priesthood and the priesthood of believers. **(1)** We too are chosen, not under the law but by grace, to be a holy nation of priests and we offer up our own sacrifices, spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet. 2:5,9). We don't have to go through earthly priests, even though we have broken the law, because we are made the righteousness of God in Christ. **(2)** Under the law a man had to be born into the priesthood. Christians become priests on the basis of their birthright, the second birth from above (Jn. 1:11-13; Gal. 3:26; 1 Jn. 3:1-2).

The word priest means *one who officiates*. Like Aaron, the priests were not chosen by the people or self-appointed; they were divinely called by God, deriving their authority directly from Him (Heb. 5:4). So also was Christ (Heb. 5:5-6,10; Lk. 4:18; Jn. 17:18; 20:21). God graciously provided the office of the priest so that the people, cut off from Him because of their sin, could have access to Him through a mediating priesthood.

Those chosen to serve in the priesthood could not have any physical defects. Levites were rejected for service for any of the following reasons: body blemishes, blindness, lameness, a flat nose, limbs that were deformed, a broken foot or hand, a hunchback, dwarfism, defective eyes, eczema, scabs, or being a eunuch (Lev. 21:17-21). Those rejected for service were, nevertheless, provided for because they had been born Levites (Lev. 21:22-23).

A Tithe system was enacted to provide for the priests and their families. The first fruit reaped by the people was given to the priests in the form of grain, fruit, wine, oil, flour, and sheep's fleece (Deut. 18:4). A special tithe was taken every three years and given to the Levites because they had no inheritance in the land of Canaan (Deut. 14:28-29). There were many other ways the Levites were taken care of from redemption money to a part of the spoils of war. Forty-eight cities were provided within the territories of the other tribes for the priest's habitation (Josh. 21). Anyone else who came near the Tabernacle was put to death (Num. 1:47-51).

Korah and all those with him who had rebelled against God's choice of the Levites were swallowed up by the earth (Num. 16). King Saul intruded into the priest's office by offering a burnt offering and suffered the loss of his kingdom and throne (1 Sam. 13:8-14). King Uzziah was smitten with leprosy when he tried to offer incense in the Temple and remained a leper until his death (2 Chr. 26:16-21).

## **THE HIGH PRIEST'S HOLY GARMENTS**

### **Exodus 28:2-38**

These garments were to be for *glory and for beauty*. They exalted the office before the people. These garments were to add dignity to the office of High Priest. They dignified Aaron with a glory and beauty he did not possess in himself. In contrast, Christ dignifies the office of High Priest. He gives it glory and beauty that He himself possesses. These garments were holy because they were set apart to be worn only during the service in the Tabernacle. These garments were so important that God filled wise hearted men with special knowledge and skill through the Holy Spirit so they could make the priestly clothes. I am not going to use the order laid out in Exodus 28, the order in which the High Priest would put them on, which is found in Lev. 6:10; 8:7-9. One final observation before we begin to look at the holy garments. The High Priest in his robes of "glory and beauty" was adorned in harmony with his surroundings --- the tabernacle; the same colors, some of the same materials, the same skillful workmanship. This reminds us of the great fact that God is a God of harmony, and that all His work is harmonious. Division or discord are not harmonious with the Lord's church (Eph. 4:1-3). Many more things of the world are not harmonious with the Lord's church, like rock music, certain types of clothing and hair styles, some traditions, etc. When things are not harmonious with God's Word, they need to be gotten rid of.

## **THE BREECHES**

### **Leviticus 6:10**

The breeches (drawers) was common and extended to all the priests, not just the High Priest. They were made from linen and were to cover the nakedness of the priest from the loins to the thighs (Exo. 28:42). Many of the nations surrounding Israel did not cover their priests because their worship was sensual in nature, appealing to the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh. But God demanded that worship to Him be carried out in modesty and decency. The priest's were to worship Him in the beauty of holiness (Psa. 29:2; 96:9). We too are to worship God in the beauty of holiness and we need to be sure that our manner of dress is glorifying to God. The scriptures give explicit instructions to women concerning how they should dress (1 Tim. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 3:3). Remember that these garments are holy garments. The breeches covering his nakedness declare an holiness of the flesh. They are the covering of the flesh.

## **THE LINEN COAT**

### **Exodus 28:39**

Looking from a distance this coat would look rather ordinary, but upon closer examination there was skill and beauty attached in the make-up of the fabric. The root word used for "embroider" gives us the same idea as our modern "damask", an embroidery not worked on but skillfully worked into the material. The dictionary says; "a durable, lustrous, reversible fabric in figured weave. Josephus stated that it had tight-fitting sleeves and reached down to the feet (Ant. Jud. 3:7:2).

As God provided a covering for Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness, He provided this covering for the priest engaged in the service of the Lord. Coat here is the same word used in Gen. 3:21. Disobedience had made them sinners, and naked to their shame. They invented a mode of concealing that shame from one another and in this way pacifying their consciences, until God manifested His presence in the garden. The coats that God provided for them were for clothing as well as to hide their shame.

They were not of their own invention, but made by God from skin taken of some slain victim. Also the Hebrew word translated skin, is derived from a root, signifying to be naked. The victim was made naked, stripped of its skin, that a covering might be provided for the naked ones. What a picture of Christ who went into the shame and nakedness of death on the cross, that we might be clothed in righteousness.

The coat was a type of the sinlessness of Christ, without spot or blemish, pure and righteous. The Priest could not put on the beautiful garments until he first washed and then put on the white linen coat and breeches of righteousness. In these garments the High Priest was a type of Christ as the righteous servant (Isa. 53:11). He is a type of the Christ we see in Revelation 1:13, "clothed with a garment down to the foot."

In this coat and the breeches the High Priest and priest were alike, for all wore them. The only difference was that these were the High Priest undergarments, but the priests only garments. Having received Christ imputed righteousness the saved are able to say the same words as the prophet Isaiah said: (Isa. 61:10).

## **The Girdle**

### **Exodus 28:4, 39; 39:29**

This is nearly always a symbol of service, the girded loins denoting readiness for action (Lk. 17:8; 1 Pet. 1:13; Mat. 20:28; Lk. 22:27). This linen girdle was not the curious girdle (Lev. 8:7). It was attached to the undergarment and so was not seen except on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kipper). This girdle was made the same colors as the vails, fine linen, blue, purple, and scarlet. As the blue symbolizes where He came from, heaven; and the scarlet symbolizes His humanity and the blood He shed for His own; so the purple symbolizes His royalty, the King of kings, who shall come back to judge (Isa. 11:4-5).

## **THE ROBE OF THE EPHOD**

### **Exodus 28:31-35; 39:22-26**

The Robe of the ephod is the first of the vestments which belongs expressly to the High Priest. This is the first time that the word "robe" occurs in scripture, and it stands in contrast to the coat. The coat is a garment used expressly for the purpose of covering. The robe is always worn as the symbol of office and authority (1 Sam. 24:4; Job 29:14; Ezek. 26:16; Matt. 27:28-29). In these references the robe carries with it dignity and is also that which belongs to royalty. Have you seen a judge wearing all his judicial robes running for a bus? The robes dignify a man for the office he holds. So we find Aaron was robed for office and his position commanded respect. In Isaiah 6:1 we see that the train of the Lords robe fills the temple.

The robe brings out a wonderful truth in regard to royalty. The priestly office of Christ superseded that of Aaron, being of the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was King of righteousness and king of peace (Heb. 7:1). The robe of the ephod having upon it as an ornamentation of symbols of peace, which we shall look at later, is placed upon a man already wearing the white coat, the symbol of righteousness. The High Priest foreshadowed Christ, who in reality is the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace. In the Aaronic priesthood a priest could not be a king because the king had to come from the tribe of Judah and the priesthood came from the tribe of Levite. But Melchizedek was both Priest and King (Gen. 14:18).