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PRIESTS AND KINGS

At Mt. Sinai God promised to make the children of Israel into “a kingdom of priests” and “a holy nation.” God said to them,

“You will be for me
a kingdom of priests
and a holy nation.”

Exodus 19:6 NIV

God’s promise to make of the children of Israel a “kingdom of priests” can have two meanings: It can mean that the children of Israel would all become priests, or it can mean that they would have priests among them.

God’s promise regarding the children of Israel’s becoming a “holy nation” can also have two meanings: It can mean that they would only be considered a holy nation, or it can mean that they would actually become a holy nation.

At the beginning, they only had priests among them and they were only considered to be a holy nation. It was not until the Messiah came that God’s (spiritual) Israel became truly a holy nation and all of Israel’s (spiritual) children became priests, but more about that later.

THE FIRST LEVITICAL PRIESTS

The first priests that God chose were Aaron, the brother of Moses, and his sons. Since Aaron came from the tribe of Levi, his priesthood became known as the “Levitical priesthood.” God said to Moses,

“Have Aaron your brother brought to you
from among the Israelites,
along with his sons Nadab and Abihu,

Eleazar and Ithamar,
so they may serve me as priests.”

Exodus 28:1 NIV

Only the descendants of these men could serve as priests, under the priestly system described in the Law of Moses; and only men from the tribe of Levi were permitted to assist the priests in carrying out their religious duties (Numbers 8:19). No man with a physical defect was permitted to function as a priest (Leviticus 21:16-21).

Some of the main functions of the priests were to offer animal sacrifices and grain offerings to God and to take care of the tent (Tabernacle) and its surroundings. Priests offered animal sacrifices to make atonement for their own sins and for the sins of the people (Leviticus 4:20,26,31). The priests stood day after day performing their religious duties and offering the same sacrifices over and over (Hebrews 10:11).

The Tabernacle was divided into two parts: The part nearer the entrance was called “the Holy Place,” into which only priests could go. Priests regularly entered the Holy Place and carried out certain functions of their ministry (Hebrews 9:6). It was their job to keep the oil-lamps burning in the Holy Place (Exodus 27:21) and to replace periodically the bread (Exodus 25:30) that was laid out on a special table. They were also responsible for burning incense twice daily before the veil that separated the Holy Place from the inner room (Exodus 30:1-10).

The inner room was called the “Most Holy Place. Into it, only the high priest could go, and he only once a year (Hebrews 9:7).

The Tabernacle formed the pattern according to which King Solomon later built his temple in Jerusalem. His temple was also divided into two parts, just as was the Tabernacle.

Priests were also supposed to teach God’s law to the people (Deuteronomy 33:10), but they seem often to have neglected this task.

ALL THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL AS PRIESTS

As we have seen, only the descendants of Aaron could be priests under the Law of Moses. The prophet Isaiah, however, who lived hundreds of years after Moses (and hundreds of years before Christ), looked forward to a time when all of the people of Israel would be priests. He said,

“And you will be called priests of the Lord,
you will be named ministers of our God.
You will feed on the wealth of nations,
and in their riches you will boast.”

Isaiah 61:6 NIV

This passage is a part of a well-known prophecy of Isaiah, the first part of which reads,

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners, . . .”

Isaiah 61:1 NIV

Those words are well known because they were quoted by Jesus in a manner that suggests that they refer to Him (Luke 4:18). He implied that He would be the one that would make it possible for all of Israel to be priests. Indeed, He made it possible for all Israel to be priest by changing the Law of Moses (Hebrews 7:12). However, before we get into that, let us look at something else that Isaiah said about priests.

PRIESTS FROM THE GENTILES

Isaiah foretold that all Israelites would someday become priests, and he also foretold, amazingly, that some of the Gentiles would become priests, as well. He said,

“And I will select some of them [Gentiles]
also to be priests and Levites,”
says the Lord.”

Isaiah 66:21 NIV

In order to find out how it could possibly come about that some of the Gentiles could become priests, we must turn to the New Testament.

PRIESTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The priestly system of the Old Testament was in force for a long time. It was still in force when Jesus lived on the earth, and He acknowledged that the Levitical priests still had a legitimate function to perform (Matthew 8:4; Mark 1:44; Luke 5:14; 17:14).

The old system lost its usefulness, however, when Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world (Hebrews 7:27); for when sins are forgiven, there is no further need for sacrifices to be made for them (Hebrews 10:18).

WHAT DID LEVITICAL PRIESTS THINK OF JESUS?

A number of the leaders in Israel during Jesus' lifetime believed in Him (John 12:42), and it is reasonable to assume that some of those leaders were also priests. Many of the leaders, however, that believed in Him did not let their faith be known during His lifetime for fear they would be expelled from the synagogue (John 12:42).

After Jesus arose from the grave, however, and when the gospel of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection began to be preached, many Levitical priests openly confessed their faith in Him. Acts of Apostles says,

“So the word of God spread.
The number of disciples in Jerusalem
increased rapidly,
and a large number of priests
became obedient to the faith.”

Acts 6:7 NIV

Levitical priests, who became followers of Jesus, were confronted with a dilemma: Should they continue to participate in the offering of animal sacrifices, or not? If they participated, would that not awake the impression that Jesus' death was insufficient to cancel out sins? Those priests were faced with another problem as well: As Levitical priests, they had belonged to a privileged class; but as followers of Jesus, they were the same as everyone else. You will recall that Jesus had warned His disciples that there would be no differentiation in status among them. He said,

“You know
that the rulers of the Gentiles
lord it over them,
and their high officials
exercise authority over them.
Not so with you. Instead,
whoever wants to become great among you
must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first
must be your slave--
just as the Son of Man
did not come to be served,
but to serve,

and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 20:25-28 NIV

One reason why Levitical priests, who became followers of Jesus, could not serve as priests among Jesus' followers is that a special class of people called “priests” is not needed, because Jesus' followers have no sacrifices to offer, except the sacrifice of themselves and of their abilities. The apostle Paul said,

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers,
in view of God's mercy,
to offer your bodies as living sacrifices,
holy and pleasing to God—
this is your spiritual act of worship.”

Romans 12:1 NIV

Another reason why Levitical priests, who became followers of Jesus, could not be “priests” among Christ's followers is that Christ's followers have no literal temple in which priests could offer literal sacrifices. Christ's followers are themselves God's temple. The apostle Paul said,

“Don't you know
that you yourselves are God's temple
and that God's Spirit lives in you?”

1 Corinthians 3:16 NIV

For such reasons, then, Christ's followers do not need a literal priesthood. There is a spiritual priesthood and all are priests (1 Peter 2:5). Having such a priesthood, they fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that all Israel would be priests (Isaiah 61:6). Literal Israel does not fulfill the prophecy but spiritual Israel does.

In addition, the Gentiles, who come to believe in God through Jesus, and who obey the gospel, are also elevated to a spiritual priesthood, so that they fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah

(Isaiah 66:21) to the effect that some of the Gentiles would be priests in (spiritual) Israel.

PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS

All of Jesus' followers, being holy priests, have sacrifices to offer. They can offer, for example, praise to God. The book of Hebrews says,

“Through Jesus, therefore,
let us continually offer to God
a sacrifice of praise—
the fruit of lips that confess his name.”

Hebrews 13:15

All of Jesus (faithful) followers not only form a holy priesthood, but they are also “living stones” in God’s “spiritual house.” The apostle Peter said,

“...you also, like living stones,
are being built into a spiritual house
to be a holy priesthood,
offering spiritual sacrifices
acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

1 Peter 2:5 NIV

Notice that the priesthood under the Messiah is not composed of a select group of men that are chosen from among the members of the body of Christ and who are called “priests.” The apostle Peter said, “You...are...a holy priesthood.” That means that they are all priests and that they can all offer up spiritual sacrifices. The privilege of offering up spiritual sacrifices has not been turned over to a select group of men called “priests.” All of the members of the church have important work to do.

KINGS AND PRIESTS

In the Old Testament, there was a separation of the priesthood from the kingship. For example, David was a king but not a priest. The same was true of King Solomon and of all the kings of Judah.

In contrast to this, the functions of kings and priests are united in the New Testament. Consequently, Jesus' followers are both kings and priests. They enjoy a status that is superior to that of the priests of the Old Testament, for theirs is a "royal priesthood." In this, they are like Jesus, who is both King and Priest. The apostle Peter wrote,

"But you are a chosen people,
a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
a people belonging to God,
that you may declare the praises
of him who called you out of darkness
into his wonderful light."

1 Peter 2:9 NIV

You will recall that God promised to make the children of Israel into "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The children of Israel, under Moses, became a kingdom of people that had priests among them. Under Jesus, however, the (faithful) followers of Jesus become a kingdom that is composed of priests.

Similarly, under Moses, the children of Israel were only partially a holy nation; but under Jesus, spiritual Israel has become a nation that is composed of holy people. Anyone that is not holy is not a part of spiritual Israel.

Jesus is the one who made His (faithful) followers to be both kings and priests. The apostle John spoke of Jesus in a way that indicates that Jesus has already made His followers kings and priests. The apostle John said that Jesus

“...has made us to be a kingdom
and priests to serve his God and Father...”

Revelation 1:6 NIV

The thought that Jesus’ followers are now reigning as kings and that they are now serving as priests is a thrilling thought. The apostle John heard a song in heaven that confirms this thought. The song said,

“You have made them [men]
to be a kingdom
and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.”

Revelation 5:10 NIV

This leads us to the staggering realization, that if Christ’s followers are already kings and priests, they do not have to wait until He returns to begin to reign with Him and to serve as priests.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. If you had been one of the Levitical priests that had begun to follow Jesus, do you think you could have continued to offer animal sacrifices and grain offerings in the temple in Jerusalem after Jesus’ death and resurrection? If you could not have continued, why could you not?
2. Why do you suppose it was that only men with no physical defects (Leviticus 21:16-21) were allowed to serve as priests under the Law of Moses? What did this signify? What can we learn from it?
3. Do physical disabilities keep followers of Jesus from being kings and priests in His kingdom? What kind of disabilities can

prevent them from serving as kings and priests in Christ's kingdom?

4. Why is it that Jesus' followers have no need for special people among their number to be recognized as "priests?"
5. Are the women in the church also priests? Does their priesthood indicate that they should preach and teach in the assembly? See 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12.
6. What are some of the spiritual sacrifices that Jesus' faithful followers can offer to God? See Romans 12:1; Philippians 2:17; Philippians 4:18; Hebrews 13:15.
7. How should the fact that a follower of Jesus is a king and a priest affect his (or her) manner of life? Should it make him (or her) proud? Should it make him (or her) humble? Should it make him (or her) careful of what he (or she) does and says?