

CHRISTIAN MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD: A BIBLICAL SURVEY ON CATHOLIC PRIESTHOOD

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ABSTRACT

The emphases on the royal priesthood of all Christians have led to the emergence of vibrancy among catholic laity especially in Anglophone West African Countries. This religious phenomenon appears to put into question, the biblical foundation of the ministerial priesthood. Through the approach of a biblical survey, the authors emphasize on the biblical foundation of the ministerial priesthood from the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament, the term “priest” does not apply to a single person but the entire Christian community. The early Christian community accepted the Jewish priesthood until Christians realized their identity as the “new Israel” and accepted the Eucharist as a replacement of the Jewish bloody sacrifice leading to the emergence of a ministerial priesthood to which corresponds the Catholic priesthood.

Keywords: Eucharist, Presbyter, Priest, Sacerdotal, Sacrifice

INTRODUCTION

The various Christian denominations have people who have been set apart by virtue of ordination to make the presence of God real in the communities of faith “through the performance of sacramental preaching, teaching and pastoral functions”². In most denominations they are pastors or ministers of the Gospel. In the Catholic tradition, such people receive the sacrament of Holy Order that initiates them into the priesthood. This article is to elucidate the foundation of ministerial priesthood through a biblical survey. The discussion would be from the Old and New Testament perspectives.

Priesthood in the Old Testament (OT)

The word “priest” originated from the Greek word *presbyteros* and was translated into English as “elder”. It was mostly used in the late antiquity to refer to the elders of the Jewish and Christian communities. In the course of Christian’s usage “the semantics of the term shifted from the ordained person’s place in ecclesiastical polity to his role as a cultic celebrant”³. The Greek word for “cultic celebrant” is *hierous*. It

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² John D.K. Ekem, *Priesthood in Context: A study of Priesthood in some Christian and Primal Communities of Ghana and its Relevance for Mother-Tongue Biblical Interpretation* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2009), 101.

³ Eliade, M., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. II, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 529.

emphasizes religious connotation in the sense that the *hiereus* plays religious functions such as interpreting the meaning of events, performing the rituals of the religion and offering sacrifices.

D.M. McFarlan explains priest in the OT as a man who was “specially set apart for the duties of animal sacrifice and other religious rites in the tabernacle or local shrine and later in the Temple of Jerusalem”⁴. From the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “Priests are the principal functionaries in divine services, their special task being to engage in cultic ceremonies which they conducted mainly in the Temple”⁵. The priest therefore was the link between the worshipper and God. He served as the bridge across the people and Yahweh.

During the OT period, the patriarchs performed what could be regarded specifically as priestly functions although they never applied the term to themselves. For instance; Noah erected an altar and offered sacrifice to the Lord (Gen 8:20-21), Abraham offered a ram as burnt offering in place of his promised son Isaac (Gen 22: 1-14) and Jacob killed an animal and offered it as a sacrifice (Gen 31:54). These few examples show that no explicit connection existed between sacrifice and priesthood in the patriarchal period. There was also no clear definition of the priesthood and it was not an exclusively reserved duty of a specific tribe as it became later.

However, Abraham during his lifetime encountered the mysterious Melchizedek who is identified to be a king and a priest of the Most High God (Gen 14:18-20). Melchizedek offered the sacrifice of bread and wine while Abraham gave him one tenth of the spoils accrued from his military expedition. Melchizedek received Abraham’s offering not as a result of royalty but the former being a priest as we can recognize in the later well-organized Israel, one tenth was offered to the Levitical priests and not the kings. It is significant to point out clearly that Melchizedek’s priesthood has no link with the later Levitical priesthood and Melchizedek’s priesthood cannot be used to argue for the existence of a particular priesthood at the patriarchal period.

Again, there could not have been an organized priesthood under the leadership of Aaron or his sons immediately after the exodus from Egypt. Although Moses was never called a priest in the Pentateuch, there are some traditions that present “Moses performing ‘priestly’ acts: he appears, to ‘preside’ at Aaron’s ‘ordination’ and to manipulate the sacrificial blood at the liturgy which follows (see Ex 29)”⁶. In the history of Israel, Moses mediated between God and the people, and transmitted messages he received from Yahweh to the people. In agreement with N. Mitchell, Moses played the role of a priest in the transition period between the exodus from Egypt and the beginnings of Hebrew settlement in Canaan.

At a point in time in the Jewish history, emerged a defined priestly office to which some men devoted their whole time. R.E. Brown argues that this emergence was due to growth in the social organization of Israel, leading to the development of professional priesthood in connection with the tribe of Levi. The professional prowess of the Levites culminated exclusively in the Levitical priesthood⁷. Several scholars do advance different hypotheses about the origin and emergence of the Levites as a class of professional priests. However, N. Mitchell cites that of Aelred Cody to be the most convincing. He suggests that in Cody’s hypothesis, the exact origin of the tribe of Levi is unknown and therefore assumes that it was a full secular tribe such as Reuben, Dan etc. For unknown reasons the Levites could not acquire land during the tribal settlement in Palestine. The members of the tribe took residence among members of the other tribes, although they were all “people of the same racial stock [...] [they] were not members of the tribe among whom they lived”. The Levites then took to specializing in “priestly jobs such as priestly attendants and oracular consultants”⁸.

Therefore, D.M. McFarlan posits that traditionally all priests were to be descendants of Levi. A descendant of Levi becomes a priest because he has been born into such a priestly tribe⁹. Further affirmation is placed on this explication by other authors including N. Mitchell that the position of the Levitical priest

⁴ McFarlan, D.M. *Dictionary of the Bible*. (New Lanark: Geddes & Grosset, 2003), 220.

⁵ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd, 1972), 1069.

⁶ Mitchell, N. *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1982), 24.

⁷ Brown, R.E., *Priest and Bishop: Biblical reflections*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), 6.

⁸ Mitchell, N. *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order*, 27.

⁹ McFarlan, D.M. *Dictionary of the Bible*, 220.

was not acquired through any ritual act, rather, the Levite assumed his position by exercising priestly functions. The Levitical priesthood was more of a craft than a “sacred office” or “divine vocation”¹⁰. For R.E. Brown, the Levitical priest entered into that ministry by virtue of his birth. He became a priest because of being a member of the priestly tribe. His calling by God to that priesthood should only be regarded in terms of “divine providence guiding his birth”¹¹.

The Levites guarded jealously their status perhaps because “the tribe had no land to serve as economic base of operations”¹². Nevertheless, not all Levites became priests and not all priests were Levites. For instance, Zadok who was initially not linked with Levi became a priest in the house of David during the latter’s reign, and later his descendants also claimed priestly rights and were referred to as Zadokites. They also served as priests when Solomon became king. Some Levitical priests were descendants of Zadok (Ezekiel 44:15) and it suggests a relationship between the Levites and Zadokites. In support of this, N. Mitchell affirms that in the “restored post-exilic community” both Levites and Zadokites traced their ancestry to Aaron¹³. Moses and Aaron are listed among the descendants of Levi (Exodus 6:14-27). The Zadokites claimed supremacy over the Levitical priests and this could be as a result of Ezekiel 44:6ff that God reduced the priestly status of the Levites as they were unreliable in their care of the sanctuary and due to Aaron’s role in the Israelites rebellion at Merribah. God transferred the priesthood to Eleazar who is a son of Aaron (Num 20:24-29) and in 1 Chronicles 6:50-53, he is presented as a direct ancestor of Zadok.

In the post-exilic Jewish community, the priests whether Levites or Zadokites, were cultic functionaries endowed with the responsibility of attending to daily sacrifices, while the high priest was not obliged to attend to such daily sacrifices. His obligatory day was the annual Day of Atonement during which he offered sin offerings of bull and goats for the priests’ transgressions, sprinkled blood and burnt incense in the Holy of Holies for atonement of sin, and performed the rites of purification, which also involved sprinkling of blood at the altar in the sanctuary.

One remarkable characteristic of the Old Testament priesthood, be it a Levite or Zadokite, is that it was not devoid of sanctity. The priest was made holy for the purpose of his office and by the office itself. Yahweh commanded all Israel to be holy as He is holy (Lev 19:2) and this placed a greater demand of holiness on the priest as he mediated between God and the people. It is affirmed that “the priests being essentially servants of God enjoy greater holiness than the rest of the people [...] the holiness of the priests equals the holiness of the house of God itself”. There were several external signs that affirmed the “identification of the priests with the holiness of the house of God”¹⁴. Purity was demanded from the priest in all his endeavours but greater purity was demanded during his priestly duties. In maintaining the purity attached to the priesthood, the priests were subjected to special obligations and restrictions.

The primary function of the priest in the Old Testament was the performance of sacrifice. The priest had an outstanding duty to offer sacrifices on the altar that stood on the Temple court. This particular function of the priest can be classified into two major roles: sprinkling the blood and burning portions of the sacrifices. The ordinary priests performed these functions daily while “the high priest was entrusted with the sin offerings, especially that of the Day of Atonement”. Besides the offering of sacrifices the priests were also in charge of maintenance of the Temple. They carried out routine inspections on the Temple grounds to identify what needed to be repaired and solicited funds to carry out such repair works. In addition, the priests performed purification rites for those who suffered diseases or physical impurity. Also, it was the duty of the priests to diagnose the disease and purify the victims and objects affected by such impurity. The methods of purification rites involved the victim waiting for a specific time, taking a bath, washing clothes and items used during the period of disease or impurity, and offering of sacrifice¹⁵.

¹⁰ Mitchell, N. *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order*, 28.

¹¹ Brown, R.E., *Priest and Bishop: Biblical reflections*, 7.

¹² Mitchell, N. *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order*, 28.

¹³ Mitchell, N. *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order*, 43.

¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1080.

¹⁵ Achtemeier, P.J. (Gen. Ed.). *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*. (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1990).

R.E. Brown observes two additional functions of priests and these are the consultation of the *Urim and Thummim* at the sanctuary and a teaching function. The consultation of *Urim and Thummim* refers to the casting of sacred lots to help identify God's will in a particular situation. For instance; Moses decreed that the Lord would reveal His will to the Levitical priests through *Urim and Thummin* (Deut. 33:8)¹⁶. The priests gradually lost the performance of this sacred function to the prophets during the monarchical period.

The priests of the Old Testament also served as teachers. The function of teaching is ascribed to the priests in Deuteronomy 33:10. As priests, they were the teachers of the *Torah*. The function of giving instruction concerning the *Torah* although did not exist as a special established institution, was part of their everyday activities. For instance, the instruction and guidance given in matters of impurities and diseases were all aspect of teaching the *Torah*. From the above, priesthood was a religious institution that emerged and developed gradually during the Jewish settlement in Palestine after the exodus from Egypt.

Priesthood in the New Testament (NT)

B. Gleeson espouses that a thorough study of ministry from the NT shows the impossibility of enumerating the exact ministries that existed¹⁷. Our focus is on the presbyterate, however, it cannot be discussed in isolation, so the discussion shall commence with the ministries of the episcopate and diaconate, before narrowing it down to the focus of study in this paper. J. Macquarrie asserts that “in the first few centuries, throughout the whole Church, the various kinds of ministry of which we read in the New Testament had become consolidated into the familiar three orders of bishops, priests and deacons”. He further illuminates that “the bishops were thought of as the successors of the apostles, who were supposed to have founded [...] the principal sees of the ancient Church; the priests (or presbyters) corresponded to the pastors indifferently called ‘bishops’ or ‘presbyters’ in the New Testament; while the deacons represented those inferior orders of ministry which we can also see in the New Testament”¹⁸. The idea of the bishops being the successors of the apostles is more of tradition than any biblical evidence.

“Bishop” is translated from the Greek *episkopos*, which means “overseer”, the bishop, therefore is an overseer of God's flock. The bishop ought to be wholesome and exhibit if not all, most of the qualities that Paul enumerated in his letters (1 Tim 3:1-8; Titus 1:6-9). For P. Toon, the title “bishop” was used to describe “the function of the presbyter (elder)” during the NT period¹⁹. The implication of his opinion is a lack of clear distinction between the bishop and the presbyter; the latter could be referred to as bishop due to his functions. The bishop is a presbyter who presides over gatherings of presbyters.

In his contribution to the issue of any distinction between presbyters and bishops, Josef Ratzinger postulates that, Jewish Christian leaders were referred to as presbyters while the leaders of the Gentile churches were referred to as “bishops and deacons” for the first time in Philippians 1:1. This postulation assumes no clear distinction between the two. In affirmation with J.L. McKenzie, there is no clear distinction between the bishop and the presbyter as there is between the former and the deacon²⁰.

Some theologians such as J. Macquarrie are of the view that the diaconate is the least among the three clearly defined special ministries in the NT and recognize its prototype in the ministry of Stephen and his companions²¹ (Acts 6:1-7). G.M. Burge also traces the beginning of the diaconate to the appointment of the seven whose primary duty was to help with the distribution of food in order for the apostles to continue effectively with preaching²². However, they were not limited to this as Stephen was noted for performing great signs and wonders (Acts 6:8) which led to his martyrdom; Philip was also a missionary who preached to and baptized an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). Although the seven were called to

¹⁶ Brown, R.E., *Priest and Bishop: Biblical reflections*, 10.

¹⁷ Gleeson, B., *Ordained Persons and their Ministries: New Testament Foundations and Variations. Australian eJournal of Theology*, 7, (2006): 4.

¹⁸ Macquarrie, J., *Principles of Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 431.

¹⁹ Toon, P. “Bishop”. In: *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 170.

²⁰ McKenzie, J.L. *Dictionary of the Bible*. (London: Cassell Publishers Limited, 1968), 97.

²¹ Macquarrie, J., *Principles of Christian Theology*. 2nd ed, 432, 433.

²² Burge, G.M. “Deacon, Deaconess”. In: *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 320.

“service”²³, Luke does not refer to the seven as “deacons” although tradition ascribes the institution of the diaconate to the choice of the seven²⁴. From the Jerusalem Church, the diaconate spread to the Gentile churches.

Many authors including R.S. Wallace associate the presbyterate to the beginning of the church, “taking their place along with the apostles, prophets, and teachers”. He identifies the presbyterate at Jerusalem with James in “the government of the local church after the manner of the synagogue (Acts 11:3; 21:18)”²⁵. B. Gleeson affirms that the presbyterate was “a form of leadership in Jewish synagogues (Acts 15:22) and practiced by the first Christians, who were themselves Jews”²⁶. The presbyters functioned as overseers in the absence of apostles and essentially as teachers and preachers (1 Tim 5:17). The kind of presbyterate practiced by the first Century Christians should not be thought of as today’s priests even though the Second Vatican Council referred to the latter as presbyterate. The presbyterate in the Catholic sense is associated with sacerdotalism and for that matter her priesthood is in essence of the term, although the NT does not apply the term “priest” to any single person. With the exception of the priest of Zeus (Acts 14:13); any reference to priests and high priest in the Gospels and Acts “assume an historical and religious continuity with the Old Testament”²⁷.

The Christian community is commissioned as a “royal priesthood” and “holy nation” (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6) by virtue of baptism, making them participants in the priesthood of Christ. The concept of a “royal priesthood” and “holy nation” is not peculiar to Christians, because in the Old Testament, God referred to the Jews as “a priestly kingdom and holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) and it did not conflict or prevent in anyway the emergence of the Jewish priesthood.

The early Christians recognized the Jewish priesthood as valid and therefore did not conceive of theirs. According to R.E. Brown, the Christian community thought of herself as “a movement within Judaism differing only in some features (especially in the belief that Jesus was the Messiah, that with him God had inaugurated the eschatological times, and [...] Gentiles could now participate fully in the blessings of Israel without formally adopting all the precepts of the Law of Moses)”²⁸. The Christians identified themselves as the “renewed Israel” and were in anticipation that all Israel would soon join the “renewal movement”. Luke accounts that Jerusalem Christians continued their daily attendance to the Temple although they were also gathering to break bread in their homes (Acts 2:46). Paul also continued to go to the Temple and in some cases participated in offerings (Acts 21:26).

J. Martos and others affirm that the early Christians, who were mostly Jews, accepted the validity of the Jewish priesthood, and showed this by continuous worship at the temple until its destruction in AD 70 by Roman soldiers²⁹. These prove that the early Christians did not reject the Jewish priesthood from the initial stages, so they did not see the need for the development of their own form of priesthood. Some Christians began to identify themselves not just as a movement, but a new religion different from Judaism and a replacement of the Jews as “God’s covenanted people”. Others also interpreted the destruction of the Jewish Temple as God’s rejection of the Jews due to their failure to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. As a result, the concept of “special Christian priesthood” in place of the Jewish priesthood gradually emerged due partly to the above reasons. Such a development of priesthood is assigned in the letter to the Hebrews.

The most striking theme in the letter to the Hebrews is the prominent presentation of Jesus as an eternal *archiereus* (high priest). This may be surprising because the historical Jesus was not a priest and appears to have been a critic of the temple practices and was at odds with the Jerusalem priesthood (Mk

²³*diakonia* in Acts 6:1,4

²⁴Dunn, P.J. *Priesthood: A Re-examination of the Roman Catholic theology of the Presbyterate*. (New York: Alba House, 1990), 50.

²⁵Wallace, R.S., “Elder”. In: *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 369.

²⁶Gleeson, B., Ordained Persons and their Ministries: New Testament Foundations and Variations. *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 7, (2006): 8.

²⁷Wood, D.R.W. (Gen. Ed.). *New Bible Dictionary*. 3rd Ed. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 960.

²⁸Brown, R.E., *Priest and Bishop: Biblical reflections*, 17.

²⁹Martos, J., *Doors to the Sacred: A historical introduction to the Sacraments in the Catholic Church*. (New York: Image Books. 1982), 464.

11:15-18). The author defends his presentation of Jesus as *hiereus* (priest) by appealing to the mysterious figure of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20), who is identified as a priest long before the institution of the Levitical priesthood. Jesus' priesthood is presented in the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:17). M.A. Powell observes "that neither the genealogy nor the death of Melchizedek reported in the Bible indicates [...] the superior priesthood that he represents [...], having neither beginning nor end"³⁰.

The priesthood of Jesus Christ is an element of the new and better covenant of which he is the mediator by virtue of embracing death by the cross. He is the only mediator because his sacrifice is the means of reconciliation between God and human beings. It has taken away sin, which is the obstacle to the relationship between God and humanity and restored the relationship. M.M. Bourke affirms that the superiority of the new covenant to the old is based on the eternity of its priesthood that is in Jesus Christ. The author of the letter to the Hebrews emphasises that Jesus is a royal priest, whose death has been the ultimate sacrifice that had rendered continuation of animal sacrifice ineffective. He also presents Christianity as a perfect replacement of the old Israel³¹. Christians then took on the identity of the new Israel. As the new Israel, Christians needed to replace the Jewish bloody sacrifice.

It is in this context that R.E. Brown asserts that "the Eucharist was seen as unbloody sacrifice replacing the bloody sacrifices no longer offered in the now-destroyed Temple". He posited that, as early as the end of the first century, Christians had identified the Eucharist as a sacrifice. He affirms his position with *Didache* 14: "Assemble on the Lord's Day, breaking bread and celebrating the Eucharist; but first confess your sins that your sacrifice [*thysia*] may be a pure one... for it was of this that the Lord spoke"³². Acknowledging the Eucharist as sacrifice meant that whoever presided over it then functioned as priest and it contributed to the emergence of a ministerial priesthood. The Catholic priesthood therefore became associated with the celebration of the Eucharist which is the unbloody sacrifice that has replaced the bloody sacrifice, offered once and for all by Jesus Christ the eternal high priest. Whenever the Eucharistic sacrifice is celebrated, it is the re-enactments of the actual sacrifice that Jesus offered in which he was both the victim and the priest.

CONCLUSION

The discussion has been on the biblical foundations of ministerial priesthood. It has been traced from the patriarchal period through the exodus to the settling in Palestine and the rise of the Levitical priesthood. We deduce from the New Testament that the term "priest" did not apply to a single person but the entire Christian community. The early Christian community also accepted the Jewish priesthood until Christians realized their identity as the "new Israel" and accepted the Eucharist as a replacement of the Jewish bloody sacrifice leading to the emergence of a ministerial priesthood to which corresponds the Catholic priesthood.

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³⁰Powell, M.A. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary and Theological Survey*. (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 438.

³¹Bourke, M.M., The Epistle to the Hebrews. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. (London: Burns and Oates, 1995).

³²Brown, R.E., *Priest and Bishop: Biblical reflections*, 19.

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