

The Covenant with Levi

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House of David
MINISTRIES

Introduction

We often hear about God's covenant with King David. However, there is little mention of God's eternal covenant with Levi and his descendants through Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel after Moses. To further complicate things, Christology has adopted another form of supersessionism regarding the Levitical priesthood. Some incorrectly presume that Christ has done away with Aaron's priesthood and replaced it with a new one for the church that follows a different order—"the order of Melchizedek."

We will prove this to be a false theology. Let us remember that Christ came to fulfill the Law, not to destroy or do away with it.ⁱ Further, God's covenants can *never*, and let me reemphasize, *never* be annulled. So, do we have one eternal priesthood or two? We will find out.

We first read about Levi in the Book of Genesis. He was the third son of Leah—the older daughter of Laban, Jacob's uncle. Laban deceived Jacob when he switched his two daughters on the night of Jacob's wedding. Jacob agreed to marry both daughters. However, scripture tells us that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah— *"When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren... She conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.' Therefore his name was called Levi"* Genesis 29:31, NKJV.ⁱⁱ

Interestingly, Leah's fourth son, Judah, became the patriarch of King David (Figure 1). Therefore, both the priestly and kingly lineages of Yeshuaⁱⁱⁱ would come through a mother whose earthly husband did not love. And yet, Levi and Judah were foreshadowed of Israel's Messiah and her future redemption and restoration as the Kingdom of God—a royal priesthood of believers united in Christ, one people comprised of both Jews and Gentiles who will serve both God and man.

Regarding Israel's current rejection, it is written, "Bring charges against your mother, bring charges; For she is not My wife, nor am I her Husband" (Hosea 2:2). And regarding Israel's future redemption, it is written, "It shall be, in that day, Says the Lord, That you will call Me My Husband... I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, In lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, And you shall know the Lord" (Hosea 2:16-20).

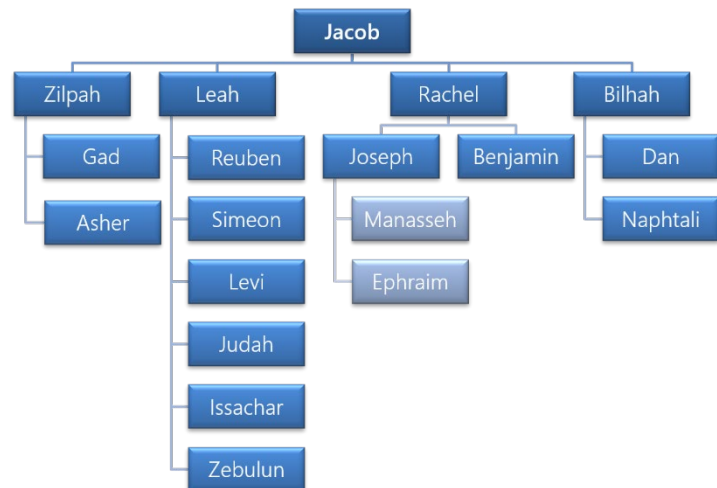


Figure 1 - The Family of Jacob

The name Levi (לוי), as derived from Hebrew means, "attached to me." Levi can be used as a first name. However, our focus here is on the surname, where it most frequently distinguishes Levi's progeny. For example, Levine, Levy, Segal, Horowitz, and their various iterations are all trademark Levi surnames. At the same time, Cohen, Kagan, Katz, and Azulay are examples of common priestly (*kohen*) names of Aaron's descendants.

Similarly, the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefilah*, also means "to connect."^{iv} Therefore, we see a correlation between praying to God and serving Him as His priests. Prayer is critical for renewing our connection with God and about petitioning Him for our needs and provision.

The Levites were called to teach and administer God's Law to the Jewish people, including the Laws of atonement for sin. However, their underlying primary responsibility in serving God was to bring the Jewish people close to Him. The priests were to attach themselves to the Lord through intimate prayer and service and attach Israel to the Lord by interceding and administering their sin offerings, making atonement and peace with God. This, so that all Israel would become a kingdom of priests unto the Lord. Just as the Levites were attached to the Lord, so all Israel will be the Lord's Heritage through their Messiah and High Priest.

The Early Years

Levi's early days were not so great. His first trouble came when he and his brother Simeon decided to avenge the rape of their sister, Dina, and annul (in their view) her illegitimate marriage by killing her husband, Shechem, and all the other men in his city. Shechem was a Gentile, a Hivite, and his father; their king had made a covenant of peace with Jacob. For this reason, Jacob cursed his son's anger in saying:

"Simeon and Levi are brothers; Instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place. Let not my soul enter their council; Let not my honor be united to their assembly; For in their anger they slew a man, And in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob And scatter them in Israel" (Genesis 49:5-7).

Later in scripture, Levi was complicit with his brothers attempting to kill their younger brother, Joseph. Ruben initially rescued Joseph, but then Levi and his brothers, at the bequest of Judah, decided to sell him into slavery rather than killing him. Given these despicable actions, one could quickly characterize Levi as a jealous man filled with cruel anger. However, what man schemes for evil, God can turn into His goodness. The Lord made an incredible covenant with Levi:

"Then you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you, That My covenant with Levi may continue, Says the Lord of hosts. My covenant was with him, one of life and peace, And I gave them to him that he might fear Me; So he feared Me And was reverent before My name."

"The law of truth was in his mouth, And injustice was not found on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and equity, And turned many away from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 2:4-7).

Wow! The Lord's view of His servant Levi is much different from the accounts of his earthly actions. How can a man filled with cruelty and anger towards other men be given God's covenant of peace with all men? Because the Lord is good, and He desires to bring forth His redemptive plans through us, despite our fallen condition. As written, *"For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29)*. More importantly, we see God's covenant of the priesthood given to Levi, which we will learn more about.

God's Redemptive Blessings

As Christians, we know that only Yeshua can redeem the fallen soul of man. However, the promise of God's redemptive blessing for all Israel, for a season, would come through the sons of Levi (Gershon, Kohath, and Merari—Figure 2), and specifically, Aaron, the brother of Moses, and his descendants. To the sons of Aaron would be granted the honor of the High Priesthood (*Kohen Ha'gadol*), which we will discuss in more detail.

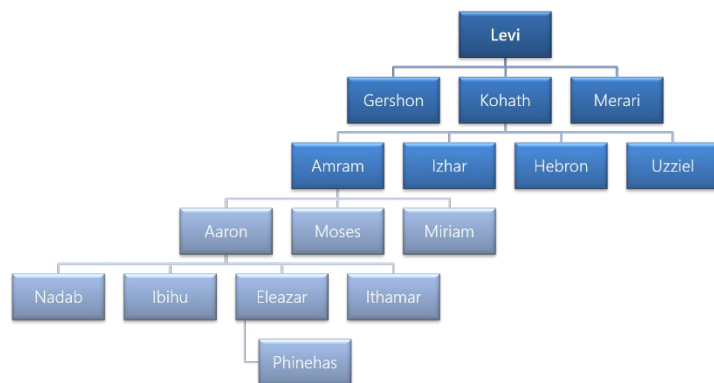


Figure 2 - The Family of Levi

When Israel rebelled and committed idolatry against the Lord,^v including the sin of the Golden Calf,^{vi} it was the sons of Levi that stood with Moses. And specifically, it was Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, who rose with a javelin in his hand and speared to death an Israelite man and Midianite woman who had committed harlotry and idolatry in the camp of the Israelites.

In his zeal for God's holiness, he killed the idolaters per the Law of Moses, and in doing so, God ended the plague against the Israelites. The Lord then reaffirmed His covenant promises with Levi and established an everlasting priesthood with his descendants through Aaron, as it is written:

"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 'Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel'" (Numbers 25:10-13).

One Priesthood or Two?

These two covenant promises (Malachi and Numbers) raise a serious question: If Christ is the eternal High Priest of Israel, how can God establish another eternal priesthood through Levi and Aaron? To answer this, we need to compare Levi's covenants with that of King David. It is written:

"When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son... And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

Notice how God established the *house, kingdom, and throne* of David forever through his seed. The Lord did not say that David *was* the Messiah. He merely affirmed that David's sons would be the natural heirs to the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom would be established in Christ (who is the king, i.e., the *throne*) with His chosen people, Israel (His royal subjects, i.e., the *kingdom*). Therefore, David was more than just a shadow of Christ. Through Abraham, he was the patriarch thought whom God would establish a natural lineage connecting Christ to Adam—the first man.

Studying the genealogy of Yeshua, we find in Matthew and Mark two different accounts. Matthew emphasizes Christ's title and lineage through His adopted father, Joseph, as the anointed Messiah of Israel, calling Yeshua the "son of Abraham" and "the son David." The narrative reveals that Yeshua was an Israelite and the son (descendant) of both Abraham and King David, affirming His royal succession as the King of Israel.

Luke, on the other hand, emphasizes Christ's lineage through His natural mother, Mary. This narrative does not refer to Yeshua as the "son of David," but instead as the "son of Joseph." While it follows the Davidic line through Nathan, it ultimately links Yeshua's lineage to Heli, a descendant of Levi and the father of the Aaronic priesthood given to Israel.

The narrative reveals that Yeshua was a Levite and a descendant of Aaron, affirming His priestly succession as the rightful High Priest of Israel. Therefore, Aaron was also more than just a shadow of Yeshua. He was the patriarch through whom God would similarly establish a natural lineage of the Levitical priesthood that would connect Christ, through Abraham, to Adam.

A prophetic mystery for the coming of the Messiah through David and Joseph's lineages is hidden in the ancient city of Shiloh, where the Tabernacle stood for 369 years. Shiloh is first mentioned in Genesis, where Jacob blesses his twelve sons. It is written, *"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people"* (Genesis 49:10).

The connection between Shiloh and the Messiah's redemption is explained by Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki). He explains that Shiloh is composed of the two words (*shai-lo*), which means "a present/tribute to him." This is a reference to a verse in Psalms, where it is written, *"He shall cut off the spirit of princes; He is awesome to the kings of the earth"* (Psalm 76:12).

He says that this verse's messianic connotation is further emphasized in the Zohar (1:25b), which explains the verse by saying that the "ruler's staff" refers to the Messiah being from the House of David. And "From between his feet" refers to the Messiah being from the House of Joseph.

The Zohar similarly explains that Shiloh is connected to the redemption of the Messiah, as the gematria (Hebrew numerology) of Shiloh (שׁיִלֹה) and Moses (מֹשֶׁה) are equal to 345.^{vii} The Apostle John said, *"For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ"* (John 1:17). And Yeshua said, *"For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled"* (Matthew 5:18).

Neither King David, Levi, or Aaron are the redeemers of Israel. That title belongs to Christ alone. While the sons of David and Aaron are natural heirs to the Kingdom of God, and heirs to the kingship and priesthood of Christ, Christ's priesthood reveals an order, or maybe a better word, an authority that was not created with Aaron, but has eternally existed with God—one that is called the "order of Melchizedek."

We have commonly understood that Yeshua's priestly ministry is built upon this authority, of which some inaccurately presume to be another earthly priest, possibly even a Gentile priest. However, would an infinite God build His eternal priesthood upon the ministry of a finite man?

The God of Israel declared to Israel: *"You only have I known of all the families of the earth (Amos 3:2). Would this same God now reveal Himself to the world through a Gentile apart from Israel? Certainly not, for it is written, "He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God" (Psalm 98:3).*

The book of Hebrews affirms that this king and priest, Melchizedek, is not a man, for it says He is eternal, and His priesthood is eternal. As it is written, *“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated ‘king of righteousness,’ and then also king of Salem, meaning ‘king of peace,’ without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually”* (Hebrews 7:1-3).

So, just who is this person, Melchizedek? Let us read and translate Psalm 110 verse four,^{viii} directly and word-by-word from the Hebrew. For reference, the bottom line is the translation from the New King James Bible. Its interlinear comparison is as follows:

Swears	YHVH	with no	relenting	you are	to the	on or	Melchizedek
				a priest	world	upon My	
					and	spoken	
					forever	words	
Nsh'bah	YHVH	Ve-lo	Yinachem	attah- cohen	le'olam	al- deev'ratee	Malchi- t'se'dek
נִשְׁבַּע	יְהוָה	וְלֹא	יִנָּחֵם	אַתָּה־כֹּהֵן	לְעוֹלָם	עַל־דְּבָרַי	מִלְכִּי־צֶדֶק
has sworn (NKJV)	The LORD	And will not	relent	You are a priest	forever	According to the order of	Melchizedek

Clearly, from the Hebrew, we are not reading about an *order* of priesthood or a *title*. The King James translation is just not accurate here (highlighted in yellow). We are reading about a *person* who has been given the *authority* of God as king and priest forever; whose name is Melchizedek—King of Righteousness. And, that person is none other than Yeshua, the Messiah of Israel. It should now be evident that this verse is a conversation, like many others we find in scripture, between the Godhead of the Father and the Son.

The Father YHVH is speaking to His son, Yeshua, who has been given another name amongst many. This one is “King of Righteousness.” And upon the Father’s spoken word, which was written in the Old Testament, His word has now become an eternal covenant promise, that He, the Father will establish, in the complete *authoritative order* of the Godhead, His Son’s eternal priesthood, forever. As it is written, *“The Father loves the Son, and has given all things [all authority] into His hand”* (John 3:35). *“I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom”* (2 Timothy 4:1).

Yeshua is the Word of God that has been made flesh. Therefore, He is not only the fulfillment of the Law. He is the embodiment of the Law itself. Because Yeshua is both King and High Priest, the Father is calling Him by His appropriate name—Melchizedek—King of Righteousness.

The confusion surrounding the two priesthoods, or more commonly, one priesthood now erasing the other, comes from both an improper understanding of scripture and false theological understanding about Israel's relationship to the church. In other words, it comes down to the supersessionism of the Levitical priesthood.

Let us explore further one verse in Hebrews that has been entirely taken out of context: *"Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron?" (Hebrews 7:11).*

Christian scholars use this verse to justify their eradication of the Mosaic Law, even though Christ never did away with the Law. He only came to fulfill it. The scripture does not say that another "priesthood" would arise. It says another "priest" would arise. And the contrast of "order of Aaron" to "order of Melchizedek" implies explicit authority.

In other words, Aaron was not given authority to take away sin, only to cover it with the blood of an animal. On the other hand, Yeshua was given His heavenly Father's power to forgive all sin permanently. Hence the reference to His better priesthood. Christ is not replacing Aaron, just like He is not replacing King David. He is only taking His rightful seats of authority as King and High Priest of Israel. Aaron and King David now come under God's proper head and authority, which has been granted to Yeshua.^{ix}

Additionally, we are told that Melchizedek's priesthood has no beginning or end and, therefore, predates that of Aaron. Since the priesthood of Christ existed before Aaron was conceived, God did not create another priesthood through Aaron. He gave him the limited and temporary authority of Christ's priesthood, the seat of Melchizedek, to cover the sins of Israel, for a season, until Yeshua would come and assume His rightful place as the true High Priest of Israel.

Paul used this same analogy when he said, *"The law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect" (Galatians 3:17).* Christ is the *"Lamb [of God] slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).*

The assumption of a *new priesthood* contradicts scripture and negates the Lord's eternal covenant promises with Levi and Aaron. That would be akin to God replacing Israel with the church. But on the other hand, recognizing the arrival of a new High Priest, one with the full authority of the Godhead to fulfill the Law of atonement and annul our covenant with death? Now, that fits the biblical narrative. We see the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel that we who are in Christ have now become a Kingdom of priests.^x

Why was Aaron Chosen?

If the Lord spoke in Exodus that Israel was to become a Kingdom of priests, why were only the sons of Aaron given the promise of an eternal priesthood? To answer this, we need to read the story of God's revelation to the Israelites at Mount Sinai:

"In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai. For they had departed from Rephidim, had come to the Wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness."

"So Israel camped there before the mountain. And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.'"

"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel" (Exodus 19:1-6).

So far, things seem clear. God delivers Israel from the bondage of the Egyptians, brings them to Himself at Mount Sinai, and tells them that if they obey His voice and keep His commandments, that they shall be to Him "a kingdom of priests." The people's response? "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." In response, more instructions come from the Lord:

"Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes. And let them be ready for the third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, Take heed to yourselves that you do not go up to the mountain or touch its base. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. Not a hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot with an arrow; whether man or beast, he shall not live. When the trumpet sounds long, they shall come near the mountain" (Exodus 19:10-13).

Got it: three days, consecrate ourselves, stay away from our wives, and when the trumpet sounds, come near the mountain but do not go up to it or touch its base.

So, all the people washed their clothes and consecrated themselves as the Lord had instructed., And, on the third day, just as Moses had spoken, a loud trumpet sounded, and the whole mountain quaked and shook violently with thunder and lightning. Mount Sinai was completely covered in smoke that ascended into the heavens like a furnace. Then, the Lord came down on top of the mountain and called Moses to go up to Him.

And here is where the story gets confusing:

"And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to gaze at the Lord, and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.' But Moses said to the Lord, 'The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for You warned us, saying, Set bounds around the mountain and consecrate it.'"

"Then the Lord said to him, 'Away! Get down and then come up, you and Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them'" (Exodus 19:21-24).

Something went wrong. First, the Lord tells Moses to let the priests who consecrated themselves come near to Him. However, when Moses questions the Lord, reminding Him that He had warned the people to stay away from the mountain, the Lord appears to get upset with Moses for not following His instructions.

Moses is then cast away and told to bring Aaron back up. The Lord also instructs Moses to tell the priests and the people to stay away from the mountain (and in my interpretation) so that the Lord's anger would not break out against them and kill them.

The related question here is: who were these priests? They were not solely Aaron and his sons. The command to designate Aaron and his sons as priests constituted a delegitimization of the larger group of Israelites who were also told that "they shall become to the Lord, a kingdom of priests."^{xi}

The Lord first spoke His ten commandments to the children of Israel from the mountain. But then, immediately after this incident, the Lord inscribes His law on two tablets of stone and reaffirms His law and commandments in writing so that Moses might teach the Israelites how to obey Him.

These laws became the foundation for the Mosaic Covenant, which Israel later broke by invoking Aaron to make for them a Golden Calf to worship. Israel essentially broke the covenant with the Lord. However, after Moses pleaded with the Lord to forgive the Israelites, even offering his own life, the Lord renewed the covenant and prepared a second set of stone tablets.^{xii}

The implication of this story is simple. The Israelites had hearts of stone towards the Lord,^{xiii} as it is written, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26). And they missed the greater calling that they were, at that time, to become a kingdom of priests who would serve the Lord.

Further, because of their idolatry with the Golden Calf, the Lord chose Aaron and his sons, exclusively, to be His priests (*kohanim*),^{xiv} to administer the Law of Moses and God's temporary atonement for Israel's sin.

But wait. I thought Aaron, second in command, was directly involved with making the Golden Calf while Moses was up on the mountain? How could Aaron be given such an honorable leadership position given his grievous sin? We will soon discuss the burden of judgment he was required to carry for himself and the nation of Israel.

Redemption of the Firstborn

According to rabbinical opinion, before Israel's rebellion, the priests were to be all the firstborn males of Israel.^{xv} For the Lord said, *"All the firstborn among the children of Israel are Mine, both man and beast; on the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to Myself"* (Numbers 8:17).

In exchange for the firstborn of Israel, the Lord took the Levites for His possession. This exchange is called the "redemption of the firstborn." And, because the number of firstborn Israelites exceeded the Levites by 273 men, the Lord commanded the Israelites to pay five shekels to Aaron for each man short.^{xvi} Additionally, the Lord gave the Levites to Aaron as a gift, to serve and help in the Tabernacle.^{xvii}

Therefore, the Levites, including the sons of Aaron, became the Lord's possession. They were not given an inheritance in the land of Israel. In fulfillment of Jacob's curse, the Levites were scattered amongst the twelve tribes where they were allotted forty-eight cities and other common-plots of land where they could live and raise their families.^{xviii}

The Israelites were commanded to give ten percent, a tithe (called a *masser*) of the first fruits of their harvests to the Levites, and in turn, the Levites were to give ten percent (called a *terumah*) of their offering to the sons of Aaron.^{xix} Aaron's sons also received portions of the animal and meal offerings that were brought to the Temple.

Additionally, the Lord said to Aaron, *"Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours. Everything that first opens the womb of all flesh, which they bring to the LORD, whether man or beast, shall be yours; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem"* (Numbers 18:14-15). Given the Golden Calf incident, Aaron was being given an honor he did not deserve. Or was he?

The burden of the High Priest

Being a priest was not an easy job. It was downright hazardous. The Levites were required to surround and guard the Tabernacle so that God's wrath would not come upon the children of Israel.^{xx} They were responsible for packing, transporting, and reconstructing the Tabernacle in the wilderness for 40 years, eventually delivering it to the land of Israel. They had to cut and split the wood to maintain the perpetual flame for the altar of sacrifice and slaughtered thousands of

animals to be offered to the Lord. They had to prepare the daily showbread, purify the olive oil, refill the golden lampstand, and the list goes on and on.

However, there was a more significant burden the *kohanim* carried, and particularly the High Priest. This one man wore eight special priestly vestments that included a breastplate (*choshen mishpat*) which means the breastplate of “resolution” or “judgment.”^{xxi} The plate was adorned with twelve stones, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The breastplate was used to invoke Divine direction for the nation of Israel. Deeply, through wearing the breastplate, the High Priest could initiate Divine atonement for the nation of Israel, including injustice taking place in the court system. However, by wearing the breastplate, the High Priest did more than make atonement for Israel. He bore the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart continually before the Lord.^{xxii}

And if that were not enough to slug around in the hot desert, the High Priest also had to carry two sardonyx stones on his shoulders, one on the right and one on the left. The stones were engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel. They were called “stones of remembrance,” or “stones of memorial.”^{xxiii} I think the Lord was trying to make a point.

For Aaron’s involvement with forming the Golden Calf and leading the children of Israel astray, the Lord said to Aaron: “*You and your sons and your father’s house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood*” (Numbers 18:1). Now that is a heavy burden to carry. Who is going to take away our iniquity? That it is Yeshua.

And so, until Christ would come, one man and only one time per year on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) would go into the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Only he could come near to the Lord and make atonement for himself and the children of Israel by sprinkling the blood of a perfect unblemished animal on the golden mercy seat that rested upon the Ark of the Covenant. And if for any reason, the High Priest was not properly sanctified, or if the Lord rejected his offering, the High Priest could die before the Lord.

The Rise and Fall of the High Priest

The Sanhedrin chose the High Priest from amongst the sons of Aaron. He became the High Priest (*Kohen Ha’gadol*) and was anointed as the head of all the priests and the chief religious official who presided over the Sanhedrin—a council of 71 elders. This number originated from the seventy men anointed by God to help Moses administer the Law to the Jewish people.

After the Exodus and during most of the forty years in the desert, three *kohanim* served in the Tabernacle: Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar.^{xxiv} Every *kohen* alive today is a descendant of either Eleazar or Ithamar as Nadab, and Abihu died without having any children.^{xxv} The High

Priests served in the Tabernacle, and later the First and Second Temples, from the post-Exilic period through 70 A.D., the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.^{xxvi}

Eleazar served as the High Priest for more than twenty years. The position was promised to his son, Phinehas, and his descendants for the righteous zealotry against the Midianites.^{xxvii} Phinehas continued to serve as High Priest during Israel's conquest of the Holy Land.

The High Priest position remained occupied by a descendant of Eleazar^{xxviii} until it was taken away from his descendant, Phinehas, for him not dealing with the terrible sacrifice of Jephthah's virgin daughter.^{xxix} Then, for three consecutive generations, the descendants of Ithamar held the High Priesthood, most notably Eli,^{xxx} until it was permanently stripped from his family due to Eli's failure to discipline his sons for their horrific acts in the Temple.^{xxxi}

King Solomon later restored the High Priesthood to the family of Eleazar in the person of Zadok, which means righteous.^{xxxii} The sons of Zadok are a shadow of the Messianic priesthood. As we read, *"But the priests, the Levites, the sons of Zadok, who kept charge of My sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from Me, they shall come near Me to minister to Me; and they shall stand before Me to offer to Me the fat and the blood," says the Lord GOD*" (Ezekiel 44:15).

As Israel became subject to her surrounding empires, most notably the Babylonian and later the Seleucid dynasty (Greek Empire during the Hellenistic period), their leaders began to align with the Gentile aristocracy. During the post-Exilic period, the end of the Babylonian captivity around 411 B.C., the High Priest office underwent a significant religious transformation. As Israel had no king at that time, the position assumed greater ritualistic and political significance.

In the 2nd century B.C., Israel lay between the Ptolemaic Kingdom (Egypt) and the Seleucid dynasty (based in Syria). Israel later fell to the Seleucids around 200 B.C., and much of the Jewish Aristocracy adopted the Greek (Hellenist) culture, mainly for economic and political gain.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes' ascension to the Seleucid throne in 175 B.C. marked the beginning of the end of true High Priesthood. Onias III, a descendant of Zadok, served as High Priest at the time. A victim of slanderous accusations, Onias was deposed and replaced by his Hellenized brother, Jason. The latter promised Antiochus higher tax revenues from the Jews and secularization of the holiest Jewish office.

A few years later, Menaulus, a non-Kohen from the tribe of Benjamin, promised Antiochus a more considerable sum for the High Priest position. His wish was granted with the assistance of the Seleucid army.^{xxxiii} Jewish civil authorities eventually abrogated to themselves the right of appointment, stripping the High Priest of his governing jurisdiction over the Sanhedrin, and creating a new and separate office, called a *Nasi*, to represent it.

During the time of the Maccabees (the story of Chanukah around 163 B.C.), the priesthood was restored under the leadership of a prominent priestly family known as the Hasmoneans. However, they merged the crown of the High Priest with Israel's monarchy during what is called

the Hasmonean Dynasty. This merge was prohibited in Mosaic Law, as the supreme ecclesiastical authority was to be with the king.^{xxxiv}

The Maccabee's early victories over the Seleucids ended in their further corruption and eventual downfall to the Roman Empire.^{xxxv} This corruption led to the High Priest becoming a mere government-appointed official. Thus, began the practice of buying the High Priesthood from the government.

When King Herod, under Roman rule, killed the last of the Maccabees, the office entirely disintegrated to nothing more than a government-appointed sanctuary function.^{xxxvi}

I share this brief history to understand the political climate in Jerusalem during the time of Christ. The record shows how the two seats of governing authority over Israel had not only become thoroughly corrupted; they had been abrogated by men outside of the Davidic and Aaronic lineages. It also reveals the desperation of the Jewish people for the advent of her Messiah and rightful High Priest and king who would restore the Kingdom of God.

When Yeshua scorned the Jewish leaders and cleansed the Temple, He cursed a fig tree and sent a prophetic message to Israel's leaders.^{xxxvii} They had become so immoral that God was about to bring His righteous judgments upon them. *"Woe to the worthless shepherd, Who leaves the flock! A sword shall be against his arm And against his right eye; His arm shall completely wither, And his right eye shall be totally blinded"* (Zechariah 11:17). *"I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you"* (Matthew 11:24). But to the people of Israel, Yeshua always showed exemplary compassion and mercy.

A Better Covenant

For this reason, the writer in Hebrews says:

"And inasmuch as He was not made priest without an oath (for they have become priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him who said to Him: The Lord has sworn And will not relent, You are a priest forever According [upon my word] to the order of Melchizedek'), by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant."

"Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

"For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who

have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever” (Hebrews 7:20-28).

Restoration of the Priesthood

And now that Christ has come and is soon to return, we await the day when He will restore everything. All include the Levitical priesthood because the Lord has made an everlasting covenant with the house of Levi and that house of Aaron. However, they will be restored in Christ, not to replace, but to be eternally joined to Israel's rightful High Priest.

And what of remaining sons of Israel and the Gentiles who are in Christ? The prophet Isaiah gave us a beautiful picture of this restoration, of how Israel becomes a kingdom of priests, and how the Lord brings the Gentiles into His eternal priesthood:

“It shall be that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and see My glory. I will set a sign among them; and those among them [the children of Israel] who escape I will send to the nations... And they [Israel, as a kingdom of priests] shall declare My glory among the Gentiles.”

“Then they [the children of Israel] shall bring all your brethren [the Gentiles who are in Christ] for an offering to the Lord out of all nations... to My holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the Lord. And I will also take some of them [of the Gentiles] for priests and Levites, says the Lord.”

“For as the new heavens and the new earth Which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the Lord, So shall your descendants and your name remain. And it shall come to pass That from one New Moon to another, And from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me, says the Lord” (Isaiah 66:18-23).

The analogy here is like the one Paul used to describe how the Gentiles had been grafted into Israel. Christ is the branch, and we are the branches. For every branch that does not produce fruit, the ax is already laid at its base to remove it.^{xxxviii} Paul said that branches were removed because of their unbelief so that the Gentiles might be grafted in amongst the children of Israel.

If we understand that Christ and the church are a fulfillment of all the promises made to Israel, including that she would be to the Lord and Kingdom of Priests, then the completion of the Messianic promise is for Israel to become a Kingdom of Priests. And the nations would be grafted into her to become a global Kingdom of Priests. This is the church and ecclesia, also called the greater commonwealth of Israel—a royal priesthood of Jewish and Gentile believers fulfilled in Christ who is both the king and the great High Priest of Israel and all the nations.

In Yeshua, the royal and priestly lineages are united. Therefore, we who are in Christ are also kings and priests, as it is written, *“And they sang a new song, saying: You are worthy to take the*

scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:9-10).

And, if our hearts are now circumcised and made of flesh and not stone, as it is written: “*Clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3)*, then God has opened the door to bring both the sons of Israel and the sons of the foreigners who join themselves to Israel, together as “one new man.”

Together, we partake in all that belongs to the Lord. For Christ is our portion, and our inheritance includes the ministry of the priesthood, as it is written, “*You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).*

Amen!

ⁱ Matthew 5:18.

ⁱⁱ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Bible (NKJV) unless otherwise noted, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reference: Teitelman, Eric. *God's Firstborn*. Blog posted by House of David Ministries.

^{iv} With All My Heart. The Rohr Jewish Learning Institute.

^v Numbers 25.

^{vi} Exodus 32:26.

^{vii} Berkowitz, Adam Eliyahu. *Police Head Hints at Biblical Promise of Shiloh's Messianic Future*. Biblical News.

^{viii} Psalm 110:3. “וְיִשָּׁבַע יְהוָה וְיֵלֵא יְהוָה אֱתֵה-כֹהֵן לְעוֹלָם עַל-דָּבָרְךָ תִּי מְלִכִי-צְדָק”

^{ix} Matthew 28:18. Ephesians 1:22.

^x 1 Peter 2:9.

^{xi} Holy Garments By Rav Chanoch Waxman, and Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban.

^{xii} Deuteronomy 10:1-2.

^{xiii} Deuteronomy 10:16.

^{xiv} Exodus 28:1.

^{xv} Posner, Menachem. *Who were the Levites?* Chabad.org.

^{xvi} Numbers 3:40-51.

^{xvii} Numbers 3:9, 8:19.

^{xviii} Numbers 35:2-8.

^{xix} Ibid. *Who were the Levites?*

^{xx} Numbers 1:53.

^{xxi} Altein, Yehudah. *The High Priest's Breastplate (Choshen)*. Chabad.org.

^{xxii} Exodus 28:30.

^{xxiii} Exodus 28:9-12.

^{xxiv} Numbers 3:3-4. Avtzon, *Levi. Who was Itamar?* Chabad.org.

^{xxv} Leviticus 10:1-2.

^{xxvi} Wikipedia.

^{xxvii} Numbers 25:8; Zevachim 101b and Rashi there. Rav Ashi says it was a reward for keeping the peace between the Israelites who settled in the Land and the tribes of Reuben and Gad who stayed on the other side of the Jordan. See Joshua 22:30.

^{xxviii} Eliyahu Rabbah 12. According to other opinions (Yalkut Shimoni, Shoftim, remez 68), it was given to the family for about 40 years.

^{xxix} Judges 11:34-40.

^{xxx} The last of the Judges, Eli judged the Israelites for 40 years (931-891 BCE). He was High Priest in the Tabernacle in Shiloh and mentored the Prophet Samuel.

^{xxxi} King Solomon cast out Abiathar as High Priest. Abiathar was the fourth descendent of Eli, and the last of Eli's house to serve in the line of High Priest. Wikipedia.

^{xxxii} 1 Samuel 2:30-36. 1 Kings 2:26-27.

^{xxxiii} II Maccabees 4-5. Rabbi Gniwisch, Leibel. *The High Priest in Jewish Tradition*. Chabad.org.

^{xxxiv} Wikipedia.

^{xxxv} Koppelman Ross, Leslie. *The Hasmonean Dynasty*. MyJewishLearning.com.

^{xxxvi} Translated by Zvi Lampel. *Maimonides' Introduction to the Talmud*. Judaica Press.

^{xxxvii} Mark 11:15-33.

^{xxxviii} Matthew 3:10.