



The priesthood established after the exodus from Egypt.

When God, after the exodus from Egypt, gave the order to Moses to set up the tabernacle, He also established the priesthood with the words:

- *Bring the **tribe of Levi** and present them to **Aaron the priest** to assist him. They are to perform duties for him and for the whole community at the tent of meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle. They are to take care of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle.*
- *Give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to him.*
- *Appoint **Aaron and his sons** to serve as priests; **anyone else who approaches the sanctuary is to be put to death.** (Numbers 3:6-10)*

From the 12 tribes of Israel God appointed the tribe of Levi to serve in the tabernacle (the tent of meeting) and later in the temple. They are called Levites in the Bible.

God separated Aaron and his sons from among the Levites to be priests. (Exodus 28:1)

Only they were allowed to hold the office of priest.

God also appointed Aaron to be the high priest.

The priests were helped in their tasks by the Levites.

The cessation of the Levitical priesthood.

After Jesus was taken prisoner He was taken before the council, where the high priest Caiaphas interrogated Him. Because there were no suitable witnesses during this interrogation and Jesus remained silent, the high priest said at one point:

- *I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God. (Matthew 26:63)*

Jesus replied:

- *“You have said so. But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matthew 26:64)*

Then:

- *... **the high priest tore his clothes** and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy”. (Matthew 26:65)*

The high priest did not realise what he was doing, for in the rules of the Levitical priesthood God had stipulated that:

- *The high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments, must **not** let his hair become unkempt **or tear his clothes.** (Leviticus 21:10)*
- *Then Moses said to Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not let your hair become unkempt **and do not tear your clothes, or you will die** and the LORD will be angry with the whole community ... (Leviticus 10:6)*

The high priest Caiaphas should have died because he tore his clothes.



Even though he did not die, he should at least have transferred his office to someone else. Neither one thing nor the other happened, as a result of which he terminated his high priestly function by his disobedience to the law concerning the Levitical priesthood. The way towards a new priesthood was paved as a result.

The new priesthood.

King David prophesied:

- *The LORD says to my lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” (Psalm 110:1)*
- *The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever, **in the order of Melchizedek.**” (Psalm 110:4)*

God referred thereby to a priesthood that was not based on the human lineage of Aaron, but in **the order of Melchizedek:**

- *First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” ... (Hebrews 7:2)*

Who is Melchizedek?

The book of Genesis states that when Abram had achieved a victory over the kings of the East, in order to free his nephew, Lot, and his family, he had a special encounter:

- *Then **Melchizedek** king of Salem brought out **bread and wine.** He was **priest of God Most High.** (Genesis 14:18)*

God had already established a **heavenly priesthood**, which was recognisable by the **symbols of bread and wine**, long before King David’s prophecy.

Jesus had probably already received this appointment as priest ‘in the order of Melchizedek’ before God created the world and not at the time David pronounced the prophecy.

Peter writes:

- *He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ... (1 Peter 1:20)*

Jesus came to the world to establish this priesthood here on earth.

When He established the Lord’s Supper He gave the symbolical signs of bread and wine the spiritual significance.

- *And he (Jesus) took **bread**, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “**This is my body** given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19)*
- *In the same way, after the supper he took the **cup**, saying, “This cup is the **new covenant in my blood**, which is poured out for you.”. (Luke 22:20)*

Bread and wine actually only acquired their full meaning when Jesus’ body (the bread) was broken and His blood (the wine) was poured out on the cross of Golgotha.

On the cross Jesus made the sacrifices **in His body** that had been made by the Levitical high priest once a year, on the Great Day of Atonement.



Since the Levitical priesthood on earth had now been brought to an end by the high priest Caiaphas tearing his clothes, Jesus was able to act as the only priest and He made these sacrifices in accordance with the law concerning the Great Day of Atonement, as **high priest** in the order of Melchizedek.¹

Remark:

Because Jesus came to the world as high priest it is quite possible that His clothes were therefore not allowed to be torn when He was crucified.

The soldiers said of Jesus' undergarment:

- *“Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.” This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, “They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” So this is what the soldiers did. (John 19:24)*

Resumé:

- When He set up the Levitical priesthood God established a service of sacrifices for the atonement of the sins of the people, in particular by the special sacrifices that were to be made once a year during the Great Day of Atonement.
- These sacrifices on the Great Day of Atonement were only allowed to be made by the high priest.
- Jesus came to this world to give the spiritual significance to the symbols of His priesthood, by making these sacrifices in His body, as high priest in the new priesthood in the order of Melchizedek.
- Jesus was only able to make these sacrifices according to the prescribed manner after the Levitical high priest on duty had paved the way for this new priesthood to be established on earth.

The changes that resulted from this.

In the letter to the Hebrews, chapters 7-10, a detailed explanation of the (high) priesthood of Jesus is given, with, by way of introduction:

- *If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood - and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood - why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?*
- **For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.**
- *He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. ... And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, ... on the basis of the power of an **indestructible life**. For it is declared: “**You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.**”*
- *The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for **the law made nothing perfect**), and a **better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God**. And it was not without an oath! ... when God said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘**You are a priest forever.**’” Because of this oath, **Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant**. ... because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.*

¹ Study: Great Day of Atonement.



- **Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need - one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.**
- **For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.** (Hebrews 7:11-28)

It is important to realise that the temple service in Jerusalem had largely lost its purpose after the death and resurrection of Jesus, in view of the fact that the Levitical priesthood was terminated and replaced by Jesus' eternal priesthood, in the order of Melchizedek.

Change of law.

As already mentioned in this study:

- *If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood - and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood - why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?*
- *For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.* (Hebrews 7:11-12)

God Himself says of the laws under the Levitical priesthood that were received after the exodus from Egypt:

- *You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God.*
- *Keep my decrees and laws, for **the person who obeys them will live by them (also: stay alive).** I am the LORD.* (Leviticus 18:4-5)

A new law is applicable since the establishment of the high priesthood of Jesus on earth however:

- **Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.** (Romans 10:4)
- **But the righteousness that is by faith says: ...** (Romans 10:6)
- **If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.**
As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." (Romans 10:9-11)
- **Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.[ah] And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.** (Romans 8:1-4)

Notice how important this is!

So are the Old Testament laws abolished?

No, these laws are **not abolished**, but Jesus places them in a **new light of day**:



- ... *in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* (Romans 8:4)

The Old Testament laws were unable to achieve their goal because no one was able to live in complete accordance with them, as a result of which everyone remained under the curse. Nor were the sacrifices able to ensure that anyone would be able to live for ever in God's presence.

As a result God did not achieve His goal of entering into a personal relationship with the people.

Because Jesus, as the sinless high priest, sacrificed Himself, He took the curse of the law upon Himself and acquired a complete, **eternal atonement, through faith in Him.** ²

As a result, whoever becomes His disciple, obeys Him during his life³ and receives these laws of this new priesthood in his heart⁴, **becomes himself a priest in the order of Melchizedek.**

Under the high priesthood of Jesus the law contains the deeper spiritual meaning of the laws of the Old Testament.

This can be seen clearly in the teaching of Jesus and how He put these laws into practice in daily intercourse, as recorded in the Gospels.

This is why Matthew 5 repeats continually: You have heard that it was said to the people **long ago** ..., **But I** tell you ... and He gives instructions to His disciples to live according to the laws that He summarises with the well-known words:

- *If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.* (John 15:10)

And:

- *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* (John 13:34)

Follow-up study: The priest in the order of Melchizedek.⁵

² Study: The law and the curse.

³ Studies: Discipleship (1) en (2).

⁴ Study: The parable of the wineskins.

⁵ Study: The priest in the order of Melchizedek.