



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 6.7.2.1 – The Doctrine of Jesus, Son of God, Messiah (Christology)

The Office of the High Priest in the Old Testament

In order to understand the office and that work that Jesus took on as our High Priest, we must know something about the office and work of a high priest in the Old Testament. Moses' brother Aaron was chosen by God as the first high priest. Aaron was anointed with special oil for this office. He had to wear special clothing. The breastplate of judgment contained twelve precious stones set in four rows, one for each of the tribes of Israel. The breastplate also held the mysterious Urim and Thummim, which the high priest could use in order to receive yes or no answers from God. The ephod had two parts, one covering the back and one covering the front. The two parts were joined together at the shoulder by two onyx stones. Then there was the robe, worn under the ephod, whose bottom was decorated with blue and red pomegranates and bells of gold that could be heard as the high priest carried out his duties. On his head the high priest wore a miter (upper turban), with a gold plate engraved with the words HOLINESS TO THE LORD. Other items of clothing were the brodered coat, a tunic or long skirt of linen, the linen breeches covering the loins and thighs, the girdle of linen wrapped around the body several times, the bonnet or turban of linen, partially covering the head. All of these items are spelled out and described in the books of Exodus and Leviticus.

The tabernacle – the place of Israel's worship designed by God Himself (Exodus 25-31) – was divided into three parts: the outer courtyard, where the altar of burnt offering and the laver for washing were placed; the Holy Place containing the lampstand, the table for twelve loaves of bread, and the altar of incense; the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant and its cover, which was called the mercy seat, was located. During the first years of Israel's history the ark contained the two tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments written on them, a pot of manna, and Aaron's rod. While an Old Testament prophet spoke to the people for God, the high priest represented the people in the presence of God. As a representative of the people, the high priest, and he alone, was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle once a year on the day known as *Yom Kippur* (the Great Day of Atonement – the 10th day of Tishri in October). On the Great Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sin offering seven times on the mercy seat, and burned incense inside the curtain or veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. God's instructions for *Yom Kippur* (the Great Day of Atonement) are given in detail in Leviticus 16.

The ceremony on that day included an animal called the scapegoat. **“Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable man. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to an uninhabited land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness”** (Leviticus 16:21-22). This ceremony was a picture of how God planned to transfer the sins of the people to a Substitute – a Scapegoat – who would take their sins away.

The man who served as high priest could not have any bodily blemish, nor was he permitted to have any contact with dead bodies. His wife could not be a widow or a divorced woman or defiled in any way; she had to be a virgin (Leviticus 21). When the high priest died, the office would pass on to one of his sons. Aaron had four sons who served as priests under him. When Aaron died, the high priesthood passed on to his son, Eleazar (Numbers 20:24-29), and then to Eleazar's son Phinehas, and

then to his son. This went on for hundreds of years, even to the days of Jesus. Some of the high priests mentioned in the Old Testament were Eli, Zadok, Abiathar, Jehoiada, Hilkiah, and Jeshua – all of them descendants of Aaron.

One of the chief duties of the priests – and of the high priest as the priest in charge – was to bring the required sacrifices to God in the tabernacle, and later, the temple. The Old Testament sacrifices were of two basic kinds: the bloody sin and guilt offerings and the thank offerings. The first chapters in Leviticus lay down God’s rules for the burnt offering, the grain offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, and the trespass offering (Leviticus 1-9). The sacrifices that atoned for sin were bloody sacrifices, **“for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul”** (Leviticus 17:11).

God was not pleased when the Israelites brought their sacrifices only as an external ritual without the right attitude of the heart. David wrote in Psalm 51: **“For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise”** (Psalm 51:16-17). The prophets Isaiah and Amos warned the Israelites forcefully against their practice of bringing sacrifices without really repenting of their sins and amending their sinful lives. **“Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies – I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes”** (Isaiah 1:13-16). **“I hate. I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream”** (Amos 5:21-24).

The notion of offering up animals to God as sacrifices goes back to the time of Adam and Eve, when Abel offered an animal in sacrifice to God. When God told Abraham to offer his own son Isaac as an offering to God, God directed him finally to offer up an animal instead of his son. Job offered up burnt offerings in behalf of his children (Job 1:5). The purpose of the sacrifices was to restore or preserve the relationship between sinners and the God whom they had disobeyed by their sins. The fact that these offerings needed to be repeated day after day and year after year shows that they did not really take away any sin, just as the scapegoat was not truly able to remove the people’s sin. We understand from the New Testament that all the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were unable to remove even one single sin. Rather, they served as reminders to the people that they were sinners in need of atonement, and that the only way their sins could be atoned was through the shedding of blood.

Besides all the priests and high priests that were descendants of Aaron, there was one priest in the Old Testament who was very special, and that was Melchizedek. This is what Genesis reports about him: **“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him (Abraham) and said: ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand’”** (Genesis 14:18-20). The name Melchizedek means King of Righteousness, and it seems Salem is another name for Jerusalem.

The unusual thing about Melchizedek is that nothing is said about his ancestors or his children. He just appears on the scene once, blesses Abraham, and then disappears. But he was not forgotten. David wrote concerning the coming Messiah: **“The LORD has sworn and will not relent, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’”** (Psalm 110:4). We will learn what this means when we consider what the New Testament tells us about Melchizedek and Christ in the next lesson.

Questions

1. From which family in Israel did the Old Testament high priests come?
2. Describe the layout and contents of tabernacle that God commanded the Israelites to build.
3. What kind of sacrifices did the Old Testament priests offer to God?
4. What displeased God about some of the sacrifices made by the Israelites?
5. How can we be sure that the animal sacrifices did not remove sin?
6. What was involved in the scapegoat ceremony?
7. In what way was Melchizedek different from the other priests?