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Intro: The Priesthood and its Sacrifices

The Covenant with Levi

The Priesthood and a complicated system of sacrifices provided the 'maintenance' aspect of the Sinai Covenant. Malachi refers to this as the 'covenant with Levi'.

▼ Malachi 2:4 ASV

And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my covenant may be with Levi, saith Jehovah of hosts. (Malachi 2:4 ASV)

▼ Malachi 2:8 ASV

But ye are turned aside out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble in the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith Jehovah of hosts. (Malachi 2:8 ASV)

Preparations

The idea is introduced very abruptly in Exodus 25. Only after the people and God have become enjoined in a covenant does the issue of Tabernacle and Priesthood arise.

Moses is instructed to gather together a vast quantity of materials for a special project.

▼ Exodus 25:1–7 ASV

¶ And Jehovah spake unto Moses, saying,
Speak unto the children of Israel, that they take for me an offering: of every man whose heart maketh him willing ye shall take my offering.
And this is the offering which ye shall take of them: gold, and silver, and brass, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats' hair, and rams' skins dyed red, and sealskins, and acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil, and for the sweet incense, onyx stones, and stones to be set, for the ephod, and for the breastplate (Exodus 25:1–7 ASV)

A 'Project' always needs a 'purpose' and the 'purpose' of this project is stated very plainly.

▼ Exodus 25:8–9 ASV

And let them make me *a sanctuary*, that I may dwell among them.
According to all that I show thee, the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the furniture thereof, even so shall ye make it. (Exodus 25:8–9 ASV)

sanctuary Strongs: H4720 מִקְדָּשׁ, מִקְדָּשׁ miqdash, miqqedash

There are many 'miqdash' in the Old Testament. The word appears over 70 times. It is a 'sacred' place, a 'sanctuary', a place set apart for where men and women could 'meet' with God. We can see the English word 'sanctify' and 'sanctified' here.

The only previous use of the word was in the song of Miriam.

▼ Exodus 15:17 NKJV

You will bring them in and plant them In the mountain of Your inheritance,
In the place, O LORD, which You have made For Your own dwelling, The
sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established. (Exodus 15:17
NKJV)

It is a place 'set apart' or 'sanctified' to God; it is a 'holy' place

Such a place would guarantee God's presence, and it was by God's presence that the people of Israel would be identified. It is the same today.

▼ Exodus 33:15–16 ASV

And he said unto him, If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence.
For wherein now shall it be known that I have found favor in thy sight, I and thy
people? is it not in that thou goest with us, so that we are separated, I and thy
people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth? (Exodus
33:15–16 ASV)

A Home for God

▼ God with us

We have grown used to the idea now, but it might heighten our sense of just how extraordinary this was if we try to imagine the effect of this request for the beginning of the Tabernacle Project must have had on his covenant partners when they first heard the idea. It is one thing to have the thought of God watching over us from... afar, but "God with us" is a little unnerving!

This would have been the pattern for a desert chieftain; his personal residence would have been at the centre of the camp. His residence would be a tent, similar to those of his people from its outer appearance, but within.. that would be a different story.

▼ Its construction

The Bible uses two words to identify this construction. The KJV and other older version often do not distinguish between the two words but they are very different;

1. one word describes its outer appearance - *ohel* a tent.
2. The other word describes its purpose - *mishqan* a dwelling place.

The first word speaks of the outward aspect, the second works speaks of its itward prospect.

The place would be the scene of much activity, and the shedding of much blood. It's central idea is of a 'home for God' and the way in which 'unholy men and women could approach a holy God'.

▼ The Outer aspect

From the outside, The Tabernacle (*ohel*) was not designed to impress. It was in the shape of a simple rectangular box.

- a rectangular box; 45 x 15 x 25 feet (13.7 x 4.5 x4.5 metres) covered with animal hides
- surrounded by a simple screened courtyard 50 x 100 feet (15.25 x30.5 metres)

Not very large for perhaps 3,000,000 people? But that was the whole point; it wasn't designed as a structure to house 3,000,000 but to provide a home for 1 person.

The Tabernacle had no pews, no pulpit, no worship team; it was just 'God's Place'. It only contained a single seat.

The outer Tabernacle (*ohel*) had two inner compartments, one of which was a throne room; the *mishqan* also known as the Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place. On the inside, all the furniture of both inner compartments was either solid gold or gold-plated. It served as an antechamber to the throne room.

▼ The Inner Aspect

in the larger of the two compartments inside. known as the Holy Place, there was no natural light. The only light came from seven small oil lamps placed on

a solid gold, seven-branched, lampstand stylised as an almond tree. The wall hangings were deep colours, woven with strands of gold and silver, embroidered with celestial creatures called Cherubim. It must have been breathtaking to see.

The throne room itself was separated from the antechamber by a thick, lavishly embroidered tapestry with images of the same cherubim. Behind that curtain was a small gold-plated wooden chest with a solid gold detachable lid. The chest was known as the Ark of the Covenant and inside were the two tablets of stone, inscribed with the finger of God. In front or by the side of the Ark of the Covenant lay the Book of the Covenant. The Ark of the Testimony, it was the most sacred object in the Most Holy Place

▼ Deuteronomy 31:24–26 ASV

¶ And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, that bare the ark of the covenant of Jehovah, saying,

Take this book of the law, and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of Jehovah your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee.

(Deuteronomy 31:24–26 ASV)

The two copies of the Covenant showed the continuing sense that God's presence, the *shekinah*, was based on an agreed Covenant of two parties.

▼ The Propitiatory

The gold-plated chest had a detachable lid of solid gold and twin images of those same Cherubim in solid gold stretching their wings over it. Bible readers have come to know this detachable lid as the "Mercy Seat", although this is not the best translation. Technically, it is the Place of Propitiation. (We will consider this at a later stage in our Study Guide.)

The entire structure was, in effect, Jehovah's visible throne from which he reigned over his Covenant People.

▼ Psalm 99:1 ASV

¶ Jehovah reigneth; let the peoples tremble: He sitteth above the cherubim; let the earth be moved. (Psalm 99:1 ASV)

The symbolism and its setting sets forth a simple truth; In his 'holy place, Jehovah reigned over his 'holy nation' in accordance with a 'holy covenant' agreed at Sinai.

▼ Deuteronomy 33:1–3 ASV

¶ And this is the blessing, wherewith Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death.

And he said, Jehovah came from Sinai, And rose from Seir unto them; He shined forth from mount Paran, And he came from the ten thousands of holy ones: **At his right hand was a fiery law for them.**

Yea, he loveth the people; All his saints are in thy hand: And they sat down at thy feet; Every one shall receive of thy words. (Deuteronomy 33:1–3 ASV)

A Home *fit* for God

▼ No admittance

These chief servants of God are the people we usually call 'priests'. It is a word without a real definition. Usually the verbal form is translated 'to serve as priests' but the word is just 'priested'. So what is a priest? The first role of a priest is 'godwards'.

There are several kinds of priests mentioned before we get to the Levitical priesthood;

Gen 14:18; 41:45, 50; 46:20; 47:22, 26; Exod 2:16; 3:1; 18:1 and

▼ Exodus 19:24 ASV - a proto-priesthood with the Israel people group

And Jehovah said unto him, Go, get thee down; and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee: but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto Jehovah, lest he break forth upon them. (Exodus 19:24 ASV)

none of these refers to the Levitical priesthood.

...and then the words of God to Moses at Sinai:

▼ Exodus 19:6 ASV

and *ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests*, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. (Exodus 19:6 ASV)

but the 'kingdom of priests' would itself need priests, and this is the origin of the Levitical Priesthood. These would act as representatives of the whole nation who, according to the terms of the Sinai Covenant.

▼ Yom Kippur

However not even the new Sinai Covenant priests would be permitted to stand in the throne room to stand before God; they were not even allowed to enter it, on pain of death. The only exception to this was on a single day every year when the 'Anointed Priest' or 'chief priest' performed a ceremony called 'Yom Kippur'; the 'Day of Propitiation' or as we usually call it 'the Day of Atonement'.

To understand the national significance of the Yom Kippur we need to remind ourselves of the purpose of the Tabernacle; it was created so that Jehovah could live in the midst of his people. God is a Holy God who can only reside in a Holy Place in the midst of a Holy People. This, again, was part of the original Covenant agreement; the covenant people were to be a 'kingdom of priests', a 'holy nation. Clearly, this is going to pose problems if the people are a 'holy people'; the campsite will be defiled. How are we going to prevent the Covenant coming to an abrupt end when the people of Covenant breach it?

Yom Kippur is described in detail in Leviticus. The priestly manual for the priests and their Levitical Covenant. It is an exercise in patience to pick our way through Leviticus 16 to identify all the intricate details of this special day. Every year the ceremony would mark the facts that God was a Holy God and that his people were an un-holy people.

The Anointed Priest and his assistants (who were actually his sons in the first generation) needed to be "fit for service" to perform the ceremony so first a bull was sacrificed as a Sin Offering for Aaron himself and for his family.

▼ Leviticus 16:11 ASV

¶ And Aaron shall present *the bullock of the sin-offering, which is for himself, and shall make atonement for himself, and for his house*, and shall kill the bullock of the sin-offering which is for himself. (Leviticus 16:11 ASV)

▼ Hebrews 7:27 NKJV

...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. (Hebrews 7:27 NKJV)

To modern ears, this sounds barbaric but one of the main themes to the symbolism of these sacrificed animals was to illustrate just how costly it is to deal with sin and its consequences. A price must be paid to make a way into the presence of God and that price would be a life; in the Old-Sinai Covenant, the symbols only show the 'shadow' and 'pattern' of the reality that one day would have to take its place. The place was called Calvary.

The Anointed Priest then took a censer of smoking incense and some of the blood of the sacrificed animal, and having entered the Holy of Holies throne room through the heavy curtain sprinkled the blood on the Propitiatory, the golden lid that covered the Art of the Covenant. As he did so he took his own life into his hands. If the sacrifice was accepted then the Anointed Priest himself would be accepted. If the sacrifice was rejected the Anointed Priest would die.

By this ceremony, the High Priest's own personal sin and the personal sin of his own family was 'atoned'; literally 'covered'. In Egypt, God had recognised the blood splashed doorposts and lintel and his judgment 'passed over' those who sheltered under the sign of the blood and ate the Passover lamb. Now the Anointed Priest's own sin and his family's sin would be 'passed over' and he and his family would be spared.

▼ Propitiation

The technical Bible word for this act is 'propitiation' and the place where it was achieved is called 'the propitiatory'; more often in English Bibles, it is described as the Mercy Seat. A price was paid and instead of judgment reconciliation became possible. If we move, briefly, from the Old Covenant shadow to the New Covenant reality we find that Paul describes the death of Christ at Calvary as the place where the price was paid and reconciliation effected.

▼ Romans 3:24–25 NKJV

being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, (Romans 3:24–25 NKJV)

This is one of the great foundation verses of the gospel. Because of Christ's shed blood, God accepts the offender and 'passes over' or 'looks beyond' his sins when he puts his personal faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

When the Anointed Priest was 'fit for service' (ceremoniously 'right with God" he began the second part of the ceremony. This time a sacrificial animal would represent not just the priestly family but the whole Sinai Covenant people;

▼ Leviticus 16:15–16 ASV

¶ Then shall he kill the goat of the sin-offering, that is for the people, and bring his blood within the veil, and do with his blood as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy-seat, and before the mercy-seat:

and he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleannesses of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions, even all their sins: and so shall he do for the tent of meeting, that dwelleth with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. (Leviticus 16:15–16 ASV)

▼ Hebrews 7:27 NKJV

...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. (Hebrews 7:27 NKJV)

This time the animal was a goat and it was actually one of a pair of goats. In the destinies of these two goats there lie deep spiritual truths illustrated in the Sinai Covenant 'shadows' and 'patterns'. In effect, the destinies of these two goats would express two aspects of one truth. One of the goats must be sacrificed and its life forfeited. Again, its blood was to be sprinkled on the golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

The truth of the cost of the covering sin having been illustrated, the Anointed Priest now turned his attention to the second goat of the pair; usually called the 'e-scape goat'. Another aspect of the truth must now be illustrated. Sin must not

only be paid for and God propitiated, it must be also be removed from God's presence. The Anointed Priest laid both his hands on the head of the 'e-scape goat' and names all the nation's offences against God.

▼ Leviticus 16:21–22 ASV

and Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him **all the iniquities** of the children of Israel, and **all their transgressions**, even **all their sins**; and **he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away** by the hand of a man that is in readiness into the wilderness: and **the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a solitary land**: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:21–22 ASV)

The 'e-scape goat', this is how it got its English name in our Bibles, is released into the wilderness carrying 'in its body' all their iniquities...

▼ 1Peter 2:24 NKJV

who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. (1Peter 2:24 NKJV)

Again, to modern ears this all sounds very strange but in its powerful pictures God was teaching vital lessons to his Covenant people.

In this Sinai Covenant pattern there was to be an annual 'resetting of the dials'. All the accumulated sins of the Covenant community would be recognised, acknowledged, confessed, paid for and put away. What a wonderfully comprehensive gospel hidden in the Old Covenant!

Only as a result of the continued 'maintenance of the Covenant' through a priesthood would it be possible for God to continue his residence among the people of the Covenant. Only through this system of symbolic truth would God's full purposes be possible;

▼ Exodus 29:43–46 ASV

And there I will meet with the children of Israel; and the Tent shall be sanctified by my glory.

And I will sanctify the tent of meeting, and the altar: **Aaron also and his sons will I sanctify, to minister to me in the priest's office.**

And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God.

And they shall know that I am Jehovah their God,
that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt,
that I might dwell among them:

I am Jehovah their God. (Exodus 29:43–46 ASV)

The Indivisible link between the Law and the Levitical Priesthood

It is important to understand the link between the Sinai Covenant and the Levitical Priesthood. In fact, they are inseparable. The priests became the guardians of the Covenant and the Book of the Covenant, their work of 'reconciliation' is a vital element of the Sinai Covenant, without their function the Sinai Covenant could not function. Without their ministry the Covenant is defiled and God cannot remain among his people. Without the functioning priesthood, the Covenant stands in abeyance and without the Covenant, their existence as Jehovah's people is nullified and God can no longer be held to his Covenant to be "Jehovah, Israel's God". The Sinai Covenant and the Levitical Priesthood are inseparable; they stand or fall together.

The first Anointed Priest... did you remember that the word Christ means 'the Anointed One'? The first Anointed Priest was Aaron. The Covenant of Levi was entrusted exclusively to Aaron his his male descendants. When Moses' role of Mediator was completed it becomes the role of the priests to keep things 'on track'. They become the 'teachers' of the nation and guardians of day by day guidance through their stewardship of the Urim and Thummin. Only the priestly family could function in this way and when even a member of the royal family trespassed into this area of authority God's summary judgment was visited upon him

▼ 2Chronicles 26:16–21 ASV

¶ But when he (Uzziah) was strong, his heart was lifted up, so that he did corruptly, and he trespassed against Jehovah his God; for he went into the temple of Jehovah to burn incense upon the altar of incense.

And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of Jehovah, that were valiant men:

and they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It pertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto Jehovah, but to the priests the sons of

Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honor from Jehovah God. Then Uzziah was wroth; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense; and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy brake forth in his forehead before the priests in the house of Jehovah, beside the altar of incense. And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked upon him, and, behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out quickly from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out, because Jehovah had smitten him. And Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a separate house, being a leper; for he was cut off from the house of Jehovah: and Jotham his son was over the king's house, judging the people of the land. (2Chronicles 26:16–21 ASV)

As we saw at the beginning of this study, this authority of the Levitical family to be the nation's priests is specifically called a covenant;

▼ Malachi 2:4–5 ASV

And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that **my covenant may be with Levi**, saith Jehovah of hosts. **My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him that he might fear; and he feared me, and stood in awe of my name.** (Malachi 2:4–5 ASV)

Comparatively, for its size, the book of Malachi has more to say about 'covenant' than any other book in the Bible and it is in Malachi that we discover a wonderful picture of the coming Messiah whom he describes as 'the Messenger of the Covenant'

▼ Malachi 3:1 ASV

¶ Behold, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and **the Lord, whom ye seek, will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant, whom ye desire, behold, he cometh, saith Jehovah of hosts.** (Malachi 3:1 ASV)

I wonder how often Christians think of Christ as the 'Messenger of the Covenant'. We can't spend too much time here in Malachi but there is powerful repetition of the idea of God's messengers in Malachi.

The name Malachi means 'my messenger'

His prophecy rebukes the priests of his day because they have failed as 'messengers of the Covenant;

▼ Malachi 2:7–8 ASV

For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of Jehovah of hosts.

But ye are turned aside out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble in the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith Jehovah of hosts. (Malachi 2:7–8 ASV)

Malachi prophesies the coming of a faithful man from the tribe of Levi, John Baptist, who never functioned in the Temple of his day, but who, in turn was a faithful messenger preparing the way for the Messenger of the Covenant.

So, let's repeat the statement that the Sinai Covenant cannot operate without the Levitical Priesthood; they are inseparable. The Levitical Covenant was really a 'covenant within a covenant' and they cannot function in isolation from each other. The epistle to the Hebrews draws our attention to this often forgotten feature of the New Covenant as he explains the significance of Christ and his present continuing role.

▼ Hebrews 7:11–12 NKJV

¶ 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?

For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. (Hebrews 7:11–12 NKJV)

That last sentence is the key; the Levitical Covenant and the Sinai Covenant must stand or fall together, if one is changed so must the other.

The back-drop to the Old Testament

The back-drop to the Old Testament then is the Old Covenant ie the Sinai Covenant within which is embedded the Levitical Covenant. In the record we see that although at times the Levitical priesthood functioned very imperfectly but

every new beginning brought the Covenant nation back to its origins. Even when the nation changed to a monarchy, the priesthood is the continuing back-drop.

Did you know that the kings of the Covenant nation were required to be 'bible-base'? They were required to base their reign on the fundamentals of the Sinai Covenant as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. When a king came to the throne one of his first duties was to create his own personal copy of Deuteronomy and to meditate upon its truths daily!

▼ Deuteronomy 17:18–20 ASV

¶ And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book, out of that which is before the priests the Levites: and it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life; that he may learn to fear Jehovah his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them; that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children, in the midst of Israel. (Deuteronomy 17:18–20 ASV)

The significance of this is that even though the pattern of government might change the underlying facts of life had not changed. The coming of monarchy did not change the foundations of the nation. Monarchy was an addition not a substitution. The nation was God's nation by Covenant and the kings were to remind themselves daily that they were 'in the midst of Israel' not over it.

Consequently the monarchy and the Davidic Covenant are really still part of the Sinai Covenant. In historical terms the monarchy was 'added' or 'added to the side' many years later but it was foreseen right here in the book of Deuteronomy. The monarch was required to live, as his people, in accordance with the Sinai Covenant and, necessarily, if the Sinai Covenant every ceased this aspect of the Covenant would cease too.

The scenes of priesthood change greatly through the 1400 years that the Sinai Covenant was in force. Priesthood moves from Tabernacle to Temple and to ruin, to restoration in the days of Christ a Temple built by someone who wasn't

technically even part of the Covenant people. There were many stops and starts to the sacrificial ceremonies of the Tabernacle and the Temple but on 27th July AD 70, as the Roman armies prepared for an all-out attack on the Temple, the priests were forced to suspend the holy rite of Tamid, the daily sacrifice of a lamb, the supply of fresh lambs having finally given out. The last sacrificial lamb had been sacrificed and the Levitical priesthood has now been obsolete for almost 2000 years.

Christ's death brought the Sinai Covenant and its Priesthood to an end and the physical ceasing of its ceremonies was inevitable. Those who lived in the years leading up to AD 70 saw it coming very clearly. The writer to the Hebrews is speaking to people who were in danger of being drawn back into a covenant that had no passed its 'sell-by date' and speaks of Jeremiah's promise of a New Covenant , adding as a final comment;

▼ Hebrews 8:13 DRBY

In that he says New, he has made the first old; but that which grows old and aged [is] near disappearing. (Hebrews 8:13 DRBY)

In this chapter 6 of "The Better Covenant" we saw the significance of the Levitical priesthood and its scheme of offerings and sacrifices for sin. The Sinai Covenant was able to continue to function because of the sacrificial systems that God had built into and which acted as the 'maintenance element' of their Covenant. We saw that Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement served to 'reset the clocks' and to start every year afresh.

We saw the inseparable connection between the Sinai Covenant and the Covenant of Levi and that a promise of a New Covenant must, of necessity, bring in a new kind of priesthood and a new kind of law.