

# Priests and Levites

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In modern times, we think of a priest or a minister as a person who has a special calling or vocation to serve God and God's people. In ancient Judaism, however, the priesthood was hereditary—the tribe of Levi was set aside to serve as priests.

Aaron, Moses' brother, a member of the tribe of Levi, was the first priest, and all his male descendants were priests (see Ex 28:1). The entire tribe of Levi was set apart to oversee the worship of God, at first in the dwelling that contained the Ark of the Covenant, and later in the Temple (see Nm 1:47–54, 8:5–26; 1 Chr 24). Male members of the tribe who were not sons of Aaron were known as Levites. They acted primarily as assistants to the priests in conducting the worship of the Lord (see Nm 18:1–5).

Because they had been set aside for this special task, members of the tribe of Levi did not inherit a portion of the land of Israel, nor were they to work the land. Priests and Levites were supported directly through activities of worship. Portions of the sacrifices provided food for the priests, and the Levites were supported by tithes (see vv. 8–21). These tithes were essentially on crops; the Levites in turn were to give a tenth of their tithes to the priests (see vv. 21–32).

Within the priestly families, Zadokite priests (descendants of Zadok, a priest who had anointed and supported King Solomon against his rivals [see 1 Kgs 1:38–39]) held a special position. After the return from the Babylonian Exile, the high priests in Jerusalem were Zadokites and remained so until the time of the Maccabean revolt. After that time, members of the Maccabean family (also known as Hasmoneans), who were non-Zadokites, served as high priests (see 1 Mc 10:18–20). Supporters of the Zadokites objected to this change. One Zadokite priest and his followers fled to Egypt and established a temple there. Another priestly group supporting the Zadokites established their own community in the desert at Qumran. The name Sadducee most likely derives from Zadok—so this Jewish group was probably connected with the Zadokite priesthood too.

## Work in the Temple

Priests and Levites were divided into twenty-four divisions (sometimes called courses), meaning that they worked in the Temple for one week out of every twenty-four (see Lk 1:5–10; John the Baptist's father Zechariah belonged to the priestly division of Abijah).

The primary work of the priests at the Temple involved offering sacrifices. They had to inspect the animals for blemishes, slaughter the animals, skin them, and cut them up for distribution. They would also hear the confessions when a person brought a sin offering. Other tasks included offering incense (see Lk 1:9).

The Levites assisted the priests. Among their tasks were bringing in wood for the sacrifices, slaughtering the animals, and guarding the gates to the Temple. Levites also sang the Psalms during the Temple worship service. Names of some Levitical singers (see 1 Chr 6:16–33) are attached to various Psalms: Asaph (see Ps 50, 73–83), “the sons of Korah” (see 42–49, 84–85, 87–88), Heman (see 88), and Ethan (see 89).



Priests wore special clothes made from linen, not cotton (see Ez 44:17), including undergarments, a tunic, a sash, and a turban (or miter). They most likely worked barefoot.

The high priest wore additional garments, including a type of vest called an *ephod*, a “breastplate,” and a crown (see Ex, ch. 28; Lv 8:1–13; Sir 45:8–13). These vestments were made of gold thread, and violet, purple, and scarlet yarn. In two precious stones on the straps of the *ephod* were carved the names of the twelve Tribes of Israel; twelve precious stones also decorated the breastplate. Small golden bells were sewn to the bottom of his tunic.

Priests maintained a higher degree of purity for their work in the Temple; for example, they had special restrictions on coming into contact with a dead body (Lv 21:1–8). Because physical wholeness was closely related to purity and holiness, priests were to have no physical defects (see vv. 16–23).

Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple, and he could do so only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur (see Lv 16:1–19).

## Work Outside of the Temple

The high priest was not a religious leader only; he was also considered a leader of the whole community of Israel. After the Exile in Babylon, the governor of the community in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel, and Joshua, the high priest, are both mentioned as leaders (see Hg 1:1; see also 2 Chr 19:11). Later the Hasmonean rulers were political and military leaders as well as high priests (see 1 Mc 10:19–20).

The title chief priest does not refer to an official position in ancient Judaism; rather, it refers to a group of priests who, due to the fact that they belonged to a few aristocratic, high priestly families, were closely allied with the high priest.

Priests and Levites also served as judges (see Dt 21:5, 2 Chr 19:8–11, Ez 44:24), teachers of the Torah (see Neh 8:5–8, Sir 45:17), and scribes (in the sense of copying texts or writing up legal documents, and also in the sense of teaching the Torah).

Josephus thus says that the priests, led by the high priest and his colleagues, governed Israel by their tasks as interpreters of the Torah, judges, and punishers of wrongdoers.

In the time of Roman rule, the high priest and his council had the primary responsibility for keeping order. If they kept order and made sure that tribute was paid to the Romans, the Romans generally allowed the chief priests a fair amount of freedom to rule. It is likely that the high priest and his council regarded Jesus (with his claims to be the Messiah) as a threat to the Roman rule as well as to their own authority, and thus had him executed.

## Sanhedrin

In the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial, a group known as the Sanhedrin plays a key role. “As soon as morning came, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin, held a council” (Mk 15:1). With the urging of the high priest, they condemn Jesus to death (see Mt 26:59, Mk 14:64).

Scholars debate on the exact make-up of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin and the extent of its powers. The Mishna describes the Sanhedrin as composed of seventy-one leaders who met on the Temple Mount to make various judicial and religious decisions.

The name Sanhedrin is derived from the Greek *synedrion*, which is a general word for any gathering or meeting: meetings of city leaders were known as *synedrions*. The Sanhedrin mentioned in the Gospels



was most likely the primary council in Jerusalem, led by the high priest and composed of the chief priests and scribes along with non-priestly community leaders.

## Scribes

The word *scribe* has a broad range of meanings in the Bible. The general sense of *scribe* is an educated person who knows how to write—similar to the English word *secretary*. The scribe was often a mid-level government official in both ancient Jewish and Hellenistic societies. In the villages, scribes would draw up legal documents (such as marriage agreements or business contracts).

The word *scribe* can also have the sense of one trained in interpreting the law. Ezra, leader of the Jewish community after their return from exile in Babylon, is described as “a scribe, well-versed in the law of Moses” (Ezr 7:6). Ezra was also a priest, which shows that the two roles could overlap.

In the Gospels, the scribes are often associated with Jerusalem and the chief priests (see Mk 14:1), as well as with the Pharisees (see Mt 23:2, Mk 7:1). They have a reputation as teachers of the Law (see Mk 1:22, 9:11).

## Related Passages

- **Priests and Levites as descendants of Aaron:** Ex 28:1; Nm 1:47–54, 8:5–26, 18:1–5; 1 Chr, ch. 24
- **Assistant role of Levites:** Nm 18:1–7
- **Support of priests and Levites through tithes:** Nm 18:8–32
- **Vestments of the high priest:** Ex, ch. 28; Sir 45:8–13
- **Special purity laws for priests:** Lv, ch. 21
- **High priest and the Holy of Holies:** Lv 16:1–19
- **Priests as judges and teachers:** Dt 21:5, Sir 45:17
- **Sanhedrin:** Mk 14:53–64
- **Scribes:** Ezr 7:6; Mk 1:22, 7:1, 9:11, 14:1

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