

8. Priests and Levites (4Q 2009—People on the Move: The Book of Numbers)

Biblical material: Numbers 9, 18, 19; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 14:6–12.

Quotes

- The first priest was the first rogue who met the first fool. *Voltaire*
- In every country and in every age the priest has been hostile to liberty; he is always in allegiance to the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection of his own. *Thomas Jefferson*
- If anybody thinks that kings, nobles, priests are good conservators of the public happiness, send him (to Europe). *Thomas Jefferson*
- I am surrounded by priests who repeat incessantly that their kingdom is not of this world, and yet they lay their hands on everything they can get. *Napoleon*
- The legal system is often a mystery, and we, its priests, preside over rituals baffling to everyday citizens. *Henry Miller*
- The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” *Martin Luther King Jr.*

Questions

What are priests really *for*? Why is there so much antagonism towards priests? (see quotes!) Why did God wish to set up such an extensive system in terms of the priesthood? What is the change from the Old to the New Testament? In what ways were priests to model God to the people? What are the dangers? What still applies today?

Bible discussion

Numbers 9, 18, and 19 give instructions as to how the priesthood is to operate. They are to be supported by tithes and offerings, since they are dedicated to working for the Lord. Yet theirs is not some kind of easy life at the expense of others—they are to be completely committed to God, working for him. They are not to take advantage of their privileged position, but to help their fellow Israelites on the path to eternity. Note this solemn warning: “But be careful not to treat the holy gifts of the people of Israel as though they were common. If you do, you will die.” (Numbers 18:32 NLT)

This translates into our time as a clear command for honesty, transparency, and truth in the actions of all church leaders—in fact it is said of God’s people, since we no longer are under a priestly dispensation: “But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God’s very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9 NLT).

Comment

In Old Testament times the primary function of the priests was to serve in the Sanctuary/Temple, to carry out the required rituals and offerings, and to direct the services. In all of this the intent of God was to make sure his true character was revealed;

however due to fallen human nature this intent was inevitably compromised. While some priests did indeed take their teaching ministry seriously, others simply took advantage of their situation and exploited the people (even down to sleeping with the women who came to the Temple). While the priesthood was a way to reveal God, it was far from perfect, which is why the true “high priest” came—Jesus Christ, who reveals the Father to us in all the trueness of his character.

Some still wish to have priestly intermediaries. Again all the very human issues apply—like the medieval priests doing all their prayers in Latin, while the common people sat there not understanding a word. For example, take the word “hocus pocus.” We associate that with the making of spells, false/kind of magic, a load of mumbo-jumbo. Where did “hocus pocus” come from? From the Mass, the very celebration of Christ’s death. In Latin: “*Hoc est corpus meum.*” This is my body. Or as the common people heard it, hocus pocus!

With the concept of the “priesthood of all believers” we should have moved away from such problems. Yet we still operate some kind of “priesthood,” and follow liturgical rituals that have more to do with tradition. We need to take responsibility for ourselves, and not rely on the word of priests—or pastors/ministers.

Ellen White Comments

Notwithstanding the Bible is full of warnings against false teachers, many are ready thus to commit the keeping of their souls to the clergy. There are today thousands of professors of religion who can give no other reason for points of faith which they hold than that they were so instructed by their religious leaders. They pass by the Saviour’s teachings almost unnoticed, and place implicit confidence in the words of the ministers. But are ministers infallible? How can we trust our souls to their guidance unless we know from God’s word that they are light bearers? A lack of moral courage to step aside from the beaten track of the world leads many to follow in the steps of learned men; and by their reluctance to investigate for themselves, they are becoming hopelessly fastened in the chains of error. They see that the truth for this time is plainly brought to view in the Bible; and they feel the power of the Holy Spirit attending its proclamation; yet they allow the opposition of the clergy to turn them from the light. Though reason and conscience are convinced, these deluded souls dare not think differently from the minister; and their individual judgment, their eternal interests, are sacrificed to the unbelief, the pride and prejudice, of another. {GC 596-7}

Men need not the dim light of tradition and custom to make the Scriptures comprehensible.... The fables or the utterances of priests or of ministers are not needed to save the student from error. Consult the divine Oracle, and you have light. In the Bible every duty is made plain, every lesson is comprehensible, able to fit men with a preparation for eternal life. {DG 77-8}

What can I say to arouse our people? I tell you not a few ministers who stand before the people to explain the Scriptures are defiled. Their hearts are corrupt, their hands unclean. Yet many are crying, “Peace, peace;” and the workers of iniquity are not alarmed. The Lord’s hand is not shortened that He cannot save, nor His ear heavy that He cannot hear; but it is our sins that have separated us from God. The church is corrupt because of her members who defile their bodies and pollute their souls. {5T 78-9}