Holiness and the Priests

Lev 21:1 The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: 'A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die,

Lev 21:2 except for a close relative, such as his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother,

Lev 21:3 or an unmarried sister who is dependent on him since she has no husband--for her he may make himself unclean.

Lev 21:4 He must not make himself unclean for people related to him by marriage, and so defile himself.

Lev 21:5 "'Priests must not shave their heads or shave off the edges of their beards or cut their bodies.

Lev 21:6 They must be holy to their God and must not profane the name of their God. Because they present the food offerings to the LORD, the food of their God, they are to be holy.

Lev 21:7 "'They must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorced from their husbands, because priests are holy to their God.

Lev 21:8 Regard them as holy, because they offer up the food of your God. Consider them holy, because I the LORD am holy--I who make you holy.

Lev 21:9 "'If a priest's daughter defiles herself by becoming a prostitute, she disgraces her father; she must be burned in the fire.

Lev 21:10 "'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.

Lev 21:11 He must not enter a place where there is a dead body. He must not make himself unclean, even for his father or mother,

Lev 21:12 nor leave the sanctuary of his God or desecrate it, because he has been dedicated by the anointing oil of his God. I am the LORD.

Lev 21:13 "'The woman he marries must be a virgin.

Lev 21:14 He must not marry a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman defiled by prostitution, but only a virgin from his own people,

Lev 21:15 so that he will not defile his offspring among his people. I am the LORD, who makes him holy.'"

Lev 21:16 The LORD said to Moses,

Lev 21:17 "Say to Aaron: 'For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God.

Lev 21:18 No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed;

Lev 21:19 no man with a crippled foot or hand,

Lev 21:20 or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles.

Lev 21:21 No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the food offerings to the LORD. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God.

Lev 21:22 He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food;

Lev 21:23 yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the LORD, who makes them holy.'"

Lev 21:24 So Moses told this to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites.

Leviticus 21 outlines God's strict laws of ceremonial purity, holiness, and moral conduct for Israel's priests (the descendants of Aaron) and the High Priest, establishing that leaders who represent God must live by a higher standard of separation from death, pagan mourning, and physical or marital defilement.

Core Themes and Key Requirements

- **Purity and Contact with Death (Verses 1–6):** Ordinary priests were forbidden from touching dead bodies to avoid ceremonial uncleanness, except for immediate family members (mother, father, son, daughter, brother, or unmarried sister). Death symbolized the result of sin, so priests had to remain separate from it.
- **Prohibition of Pagan Mourning Customs (Verses 5–6):** Priests could not shave bald spots on their heads, trim their beards into strange shapes, or cut their flesh—practices common among surrounding pagan nations and idol worshipers.
- **Marriage Restrictions (Verses 7–8, 13–15):** Priests were barred from marrying prostitutes, women defiled by immorality, or divorced women. The High Priest faced an even stricter rule: he could only marry an Israelite virgin from his own clan and was forbidden from marrying a widow or divorced woman.
- **The High Priest's Standard (Verses 10–12):** The High Priest—who wore special anointing oil and garments—was prohibited from going near any corpse at all (even his parents') and could not show traditional public signs of mourning like tearing his clothes or letting his hair hang loose.
- **Physical Blemishes and Altar Service (Verses 16–24):** Aaron's descendants who had physical defects (such as blindness, lameness, disfigurement, dwarfism, or skin conditions) were barred from presenting food or offerings at the altar. However, they were still permitted to eat the holy food provided for the priests.

Theological and New Testament Significance

- **Symbol of Divine Perfection:** The rigid requirements—that both the sacrificial animal and the priest presenting it had to be unblemished—reflected God's absolute holiness and the gravity of drawing near to His presence.
- **Foreshadowing Jesus Christ:** These old covenant patterns point forward to Jesus Christ as the ultimate, sinless, and permanently undefiled High Priest who transcends human weakness and death.
- **Leadership and the Church:** In the New Testament, the principles of Leviticus 21 inform higher character and conduct expectations for spiritual leaders (such as overseers and elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1), while teaching that through Christ's sacrifice, believers have direct access to God.

Leviticus 21 relates to the New Testament as a shadow and type that points forward to Jesus Christ as the ultimate, sinless High Priest and transforms all believers into a "royal priesthood".

Key Connections to the New Testament

- **Jesus as the Ultimate High Priest:**
    - **In Leviticus 21, Aaronite priests had to remain ceremonially pure, avoid contact with death, and present unblemished offerings.**
    - **The New Testament (especially Hebrews 7:26) fulfills this by presenting Jesus as our truly holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate High Priest who needed no sacrifice for Himself.**

Heb 7:25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.
Heb 7:26 Such a high priest truly meets our need--one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

- **Physical Blemishes vs. Spiritual Perfection:**
    - **Leviticus 21:16–23 barred priests with physical defects or injuries from offering food at the altar, symbolizing physical wholeness before a holy God.**
- **The New Testament shifts focus from physical or ceremonial perfection to spiritual and moral purity through Christ. Through His resurrection, Christ resolves the brokenness of the old system, and believers are promised future bodily redemption where all will stand complete in God's presence.**

2Co 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

- **The Priesthood of All Believers:**
    - **Under the Old Covenant, access to the immediate presence of God and altar service was restricted strictly to the genealogical descendants of Aaron.**
    - **Under the New Covenant, the old Levitical system is superseded. 1 Peter 2:4,5, 9 declares that all Christians now form a "holy priesthood" and "royal priesthood," offering spiritual sacrifices directly to God.**

1Pe 2:4 As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him--
1Pe 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1Pe 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

- **Covenant Purity and Marriage:**
    - **Leviticus 21 placed strict marital restrictions on priests to preserve ceremonial sanctity.**
    - **New Testament teachings echo this call for exclusive, unblemished dedication to God, and Paul draws on the "one-flesh" union mystery in Ephesians 5:31-32 as a picture of Christ and the Church.**

Eph 5:31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."
Eph 5:32 This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Hebrews chapters 7 through 10, the author systematically argues that Jesus Christ's priesthood is superior to the Old Covenant Levitical priesthood. The core distinction is that the Levitical system was a temporary, flawed shadow, while Christ's priesthood is permanent, perfect, and ultimate.

The theological breakdown contrasts the two across four primary categories:

1. The Order and Lineage (Hebrews 7)

Heb 7:1 This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him,

Heb 7:2 and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace."

Heb 7:3 Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

Heb 7:4 Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder!

Heb 7:5 Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people--that is, from their fellow Israelites--even though they also are descended from Abraham.

Heb 7:6 This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.

Heb 7:7 And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater.

Heb 7:8 In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living.

Heb 7:9 One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham,

Heb 7:10 because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

Heb 7:11 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?

Heb 7:12 For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.

Heb 7:13 He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar.

Heb 7:14 For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

Heb 7:15 And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears,

Heb 7:16 one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.

Heb 7:17 For it is declared: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

Heb 7:18 The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless

Heb 7:19 (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

Heb 7:20 And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath,

Heb 7:21 but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'"

Heb 7:22 Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

Heb 7:23 Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office;

Heb 7:24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.

Heb 7:25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Heb 7:26 Such a high priest truly meets our need--one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Heb 7:27 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.

Heb 7:28 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.

- **Levitical Priesthood: Based purely on physical lineage and tribal descent (the tribe of Levi). These priests were mortal, meaning their priesthood was continually interrupted by death and required constant succession.**

- **Christ's Priesthood: Modeled after the Order of Melchizedek, a unique historical figure who was both a king and a priest without recorded genealogy, beginning, or end. Jesus (from the tribe of Judah) operates on the basis of an indestructible life, remaining a priest permanently without any need for successors. Because Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, the author notes that Levi (ancestor of the Levitical priests) implicitly paid tithes to Melchizedek, proving the absolute superiority of Christ's order.**

- **2. The Covenant and Guarantee (Hebrews 8)**
- **Levitical Priesthood: Mediated the Old Covenant (Mosaic Law). This covenant was flawed—not because God's law was bad, but because human weakness meant the people could not remain faithful to it. It relied on an earthly tabernacle that was merely a copy and shadow of heavenly things.**
- **Christ's Priesthood: Mediates the New Covenant, which is built on "better promises". Rather than relying on external laws written on stone, Christ secures a covenant where God's laws are written directly on believers' hearts and minds, offering a true, experiential knowledge of God and permanent forgiveness.**

3. The Sanctuary and Access (Hebrews 9)

Heb 9:1 Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.

Heb 9:2 A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place.

Heb 9:3 Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place,

Heb 9:4 which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant.

Heb 9:5 Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.

Heb 9:6 When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry.

Heb 9:7 But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.

Heb 9:8 The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning.

Heb 9:9 This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.

Heb 9:10 They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings--external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Heb 9:11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this

creation.

Heb 9:12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

Heb 9:13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.

Heb 9:14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Heb 9:15 For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance--now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

Heb 9:16 In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it,

Heb 9:17 because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living.

Heb 9:18 This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood.

Heb 9:19 When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people.

Heb 9:20 He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep."

Heb 9:21 In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies.

Heb 9:22 In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Heb 9:23 It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.

Heb 9:24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.

Heb 9:25 Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own.

Heb 9:26 Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Heb 9:27 Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,

Heb 9:28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

- **Levitical Priesthood: Operated within a tented, earthly sanctuary made by human hands. Access to God's presence was highly restricted. Only the High Priest could enter the innermost room (the Holy of Holies) once a year on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), and he could never enter without animal blood to cover his own sins and the sins of the people.**

- **Christ's Priesthood: Entered the greater and more perfect tent, the true heavenly sanctuary. When Jesus died, the barrier between God and humanity was torn away. Because He entered by His own blood, believers now have immediate, unhindered, and bold access to the throne of God at any time.**

4. The Sacrifice and Efficacy (Hebrews 10)

Heb 10:1 The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming--not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.

Heb 10:2 Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.

Heb 10:3 But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins.

Heb 10:4 It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Heb 10:5 Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me;

Heb 10:6 with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.

Heb 10:7 Then I said, 'Here I am--it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, my God.'"

Heb 10:8 First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them"--though they were offered in accordance with the law.

Heb 10:9 Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second.

Heb 10:10 And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Heb 10:11 Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

Heb 10:12 But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

Heb 10:13 and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool.

Heb 10:14 For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Heb 10:15 The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

Heb 10:16 "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."

Heb 10:17 Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."

Heb 10:18 And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

Heb 10:19 Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,

Heb 10:20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,

Heb 10:21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

Heb 10:22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Heb 10:23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Heb 10:24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

Heb 10:25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Heb 10:26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,

Heb 10:27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Heb 10:28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Heb 10:29 How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Heb 10:30 For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people."

Heb 10:31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Heb 10:32 Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering.

Heb 10:33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated.

Heb 10:34 You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

Heb 10:35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

Heb 10:36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

Heb 10:37 For, "In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay."

Heb 10:38 And, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back."

Heb 10:39 But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

- **Levitical Priesthood: Offered animal sacrifices continuously, day after day, year after year. The author notes that the endless repetition of these sacrifices is proof that they could never actually take away sins or cleanse the conscience of the worshiper. They served only as an annual reminder of sin.**

- **Christ's Priesthood: Offered Himself as the final sacrifice. Because His life is perfect and eternal, His sacrifice was made once for all. It never needs to be repeated because it completely and permanently perfected those who are being sanctified, rendering the old sacrificial system obsolete.**

Summary Comparison

Feature	Levitical Priesthood	Christ's Priesthood
Order	Aaronic / Levitical (Tribe of Levi)	Order of Melchizedek (Tribe of Judah)
Tenure	Temporary; interrupted by death	Permanent; based on an indestructible life
Covenant	Old Covenant (Mosaic Law)	New Covenant (Internalized Grace)
Sanctuary	Earthly Tabernacle (Shadow/Copy)	Heavenly Sanctuary (The True Tent)
Sacrifice	Repeated animal blood (Covers sin)	Once-for-all blood of Christ (Removes sin)
Outcome	Made nothing perfect; limited access	Provides total perfection and direct access