

The Priest of God

Priests in the Newar sacrificial system

In the Hindu tradition the great patron of the sacrifice was the king himself. In Nepal as elsewhere in South Asia, the king as the patron of the sacrifice is a model for all householders. As patron of his family, his lineage and the city as a whole the king employed a wide range of ritual practitioners: Brahman *purohit*, Karmācārya Tantric priest, Nāpit Barber, and Karamjit and Kāpāli Death specialists. All these in one way or another do some kind of priestly work. The first act of the priest is to purify himself before he can act as the representative for others. The Brahman *purohit* or *pujāri*, especially, had to remain in an exceptionally high state of ritual purity by avoiding certain foods, bathing in ritually pure waters, and observing many other rules peculiar to his caste.

Newar society also recognised, however, that such specialist services from outsiders were not enough by themselves. The householder also has to perform as a priest for the entire household on many occasions. Moreover, in a number of situations another member of one's own family has to perform a ritual function. One's own son must perform death rites. One's married-out daughter must come on the seventh day after death to 'feed the ghost' of the departed. Furthermore, one's mother's brother [*pāju*] and father's sister [*nini*] have ritual actions to perform at life-cycle rituals, such as the carrying out of one's pared toenails at Loincloth Worship [Kayta Pujā] or Mock Marriage [Ihi].

The employment of a priest outside the household demonstrates the view that the householder himself is not able to act efficaciously. The reason for this is not entirely clear. Perhaps there is the understanding that the king (and other householders after him) is impure because of his role as a warrior and judge. The hand that sheds blood cannot effectively act to draw himself or anyone else to God or make propitiation for sin.

Not just anyone can take up the role of a priest. There are certain qualifications that must be fulfilled. A priest, in the Newar tradition must be:

1. A *real* man. A cow, for instance, could not be a priest because she is not sufficiently like the person who needs to be represented.
2. A *righteous* man, unsullied by sin. He must maintain a high level of ritual purity. But he is often made impure so has to go through ritual purification on a regular basis.
3. A *representative* man, preferably from one's own family.

The mysterious priest king Melchizedek

The great patriarch Abraham was living in tents in the land of Canaan. He had separated from his nephew Lot who had gone to live in the nearby city of Sodom. At that time war broke out between the cities of Sodom and her allies and a group of cities led by a king called Kedorlaomer. Kedorlaomer's army defeated Sodom and her allies and took Lot and the other inhabitants and all their goods away as loot. Abraham mustered an army and went off in pursuit of Kedorlaomer. Defeating him in battle he rescued Lot and his family and all the others who had been taken into slavery. On his return we read of this incident:

Then Melchizedek king of Salem¹ brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
And praise be to God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Genesis 14:18-20)

Not much is known about this mysterious character Melchizedek. The Lord God had revealed himself to this great king and he had become his priest. He came out to meet Abraham and, with the insight that the Lord had given him, pronounced the blessing of God Most High on him. Abraham recognised his authority, and in response to his blessing and in thankfulness for God's help in defeating his enemies he gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the plunder.

Israel's priests

In some ways the priests of the nation of Israel were like the common Israelites and in other ways they were unlike them. They had to be like them, in order to represent them. But they had to be different because they had to maintain a high level of ritual purity. While they were in the desert the Lord instructed Moses how he should establish a priestly lineage for the nation:

Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests. (Exodus 28:1)

Only men descended from Aaron were allowed to be priests. All the Israelites were to give a tenth of their grain as a fee [*dakshina*] to the priests so that they could serve the people without having to work as farmers as well.

We can learn three things about the priests of Israel. Firstly, the priest had to be a *real* man. The Lord even told Moses that the priest had to be a perfect man:

The Lord said to Moses, "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.' (Leviticus 21:16)

So for this reason a man who couldn't have children, for instance, was disqualified from becoming a priest. Later, a devotee explained why this should be so important:

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. (Hebrews 5:1-2)

Secondly, the priest had to be a *righteous* man as well. This was shown to the people by the special clothing and jewellery that they had to wear:

Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honour. (Exodus 28:2)

¹ That is, Jerusalem.

Make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it as on a seal: HOLY TO THE LORD. (Exodus 28:36)

The priest's first duty was to keep himself ritually pure. Before each act of worship he was to attain, through ritual, a higher than usual level of purity. In his priestly work he wore specially made sacred clothes that covered his impure body. Later King David wrote a psalm [*bhajan*] to the Lord in which he expressed the same desire:

May your priests be clothed with righteousness (Psalm 132:9)

Thirdly, the priest was to be a *representative* man.

Take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel in the order of their birth—six names on one stone and the remaining six on the other. Engrave the names of the sons of Israel on the two stones the way a gem cutter engraves a seal. Then mount the stones in gold filigree settings and fasten them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod as memorial stones for the sons of Israel. Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the LORD. (Ex. 28:9-12)

Whenever he entered the sanctuary he represented every man, woman and child in Israel. Furthermore, if the priest sinned, all the people also shared his guilt:

If the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, he must bring to the LORD a young bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed. (Leviticus 4:3)

In summary, then, the priest of Israel had to be:

1. A *real* man.
2. A *righteous* man.
3. A *representative* man.

Jesus the great high priest

The priests of the nation of Israel were never able to fulfil their duties as God intended them to. They could maintain a high level of ritual purity. They could offer the animal sacrifices exactly as the Lord had instructed them to. But their service could never completely please God. They had a problem: they were sinners just like the common

Israelites. Their ritual purity was not enough to make them really pure. They needed to be spiritually and morally pure as well. But in one sense they were able to fulfil their duty—they were able to point towards a perfect priest. The perfect priest would not first have to offer a sacrifice for his own sin before he was pure enough to offer one for the people. He would already be pure. The people looked forward to the arrival of that perfect priest.

When Jesus arrived, however, many people did not recognise him as the perfect priest. But some did. They watched his life. He never sinned. A devotee states clearly that only Jesus fulfilled the Lord's requirements for a perfect priest and calls him the great high priest. This is how he describes Him:

... We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

Jesus was called by God to be the great high priest.

No one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.”² (Hebrews 5:4-5)

Jesus like Melchizedek

As a priest, Jesus was not so much like Aaron as he was like Melchizedek. King David saw this long before Jesus came to this earth. In his psalm he says this of the coming priest:

You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek. (Psalm 110:4)

This means that Jesus was not like Aaron and his sons who all died. The coming great high priest would live forever. No one knows where Melchizedek came from.

² Psalm 2:7.

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

We don't know about Melchizedek's ancestry, or about his birth or death. In that sense then he lives forever. And Jesus is like that—he too lives forever, not just in legend but in reality because he rose from death and ascended into heaven never to die again. The same devotee goes on:

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, their brothers—even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, 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. For it is declared:

“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”³

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. (Hebrews 7:4-19)

³ Psalm 110:4.

Jesus the perfect priest

Now David lived midway between the giving of the law to Moses and the coming of Jesus. David wrote Psalm 110 under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In it he adds another detail that makes Jesus' priesthood more important than Aaron's is—Jesus became a priest with an oath:

“The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
‘You are a priest forever.’” (Psalm 110:4)

Again the devotee writing to the Hebrews takes note of this difference:

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. 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. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. (Hebrews 7:22—8:2)

In summary, then, the Lord Jesus is a *real* man, a *righteous* man, and a *representative* man. He is the perfect fulfilment of our great need. This truly is good news indeed. We do not need imperfect priests because Jesus is the perfect priest. We can come to God with the help of Jesus.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

When we come in this way to the Lord the great high priest will purify us and change our heart.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel. 36: 25-27)

