

The Ordination of Priests

Devotional Reading: Psalm 133

Background Scripture: Exodus 29:1-37; Leviticus 8:1-36

Exodus 29:1-9, 35-37

¹ “This is what you are to do to consecrate them, so they may serve me as priests: Take a young bull and two rams without defect. ² And from the finest wheat flour make round loaves without yeast, thick loaves without yeast and with olive oil mixed in, and thin loaves without yeast and brushed with olive oil. ³ Put them in a basket and present them along with the bull and the two rams. ⁴ Then bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance to the tent of meeting and wash them with water. ⁵ Take the garments and dress Aaron with the tunic, the robe of the ephod, the ephod itself and the breastpiece. Fasten the ephod on him by its skillfully woven waistband. ⁶ Put the turban on his head and attach the sacred

emblem to the turban. ⁷ Take the anointing oil and anoint him by pouring it on his head. ⁸ Bring his sons and dress them in tunics ⁹ and fasten caps on them. Then tie sashes on Aaron and his sons. The priesthood is theirs by a lasting ordinance.

“Then you shall ordain Aaron and his sons.”

³⁵ “Do for Aaron and his sons everything I have commanded you, taking seven days to ordain them. ³⁶ Sacrifice a bull each day as a sin offering to make atonement. Purify the altar by making atonement for it, and anoint it to consecrate it. ³⁷ For seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy.

Key Text

“The priesthood is theirs by a lasting ordinance. Then you shall ordain Aaron and his sons.”

—Exodus 29:9b

For those of an older generation, the designation “ordained minister” brings certain images to mind. Such images might include that of a devout person who has spent several years in seminary, preparing to be ordained after graduating with a degree in Bible, theology, or even counseling.

This paradigm began to break down in the United States in the late 1960s. That was the decade the Universal Life Church started issuing certificates of ordination to anyone who desired one. These easily obtained certificates began to be recognized by local governments for performing weddings, etc. Thus, a privilege of the church became, in many instances, just a business opportunity—a chance to earn a living officiating at various functions.

But that wasn’t the first time such a thing had happened. It also happened in ancient Israel’s ordained priesthood. What began in all holiness at God’s initiative eventually became an unholy travesty of sinful rulers (example: 1 Kings 12:31). The shocking picture of this decline is best appreciated by a consideration of priestly ordination at its ideal beginning—the subject of today’s lesson.

B. Lesson Context

In Israel’s earliest days, Aaron and his sons became the first priests under the nation’s leadership by Moses, who was Aaron’s brother (Exodus 7:1; 28:1). They were anointed, ordained, and consecrated to do so (28:41). The act of anointing consisted of pouring oil on the priest’s head, done as a ritual to show a person had been selected. Ordination was the act of appointment through the authority of the congregation of the people. Consecration was the “setting apart” of the person for the tasks of the priesthood, with the tacit agreement that the person would strive to live a holy, blameless life, observing the laws of Israel as given by God through Moses.

We can note at the outset that the possible meanings (semantic range) of English words shift over time, as do words in all languages. The words *ordination* and *ordain* do not appear in the text of

Costly

Sacrifices

Unit 1: Tabernacle, Sacrifices, and Atonement

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Define “ordination” in the sense of “consecration.”
2. Compare and contrast ordination/consecration in the Old Testament with its value and practice in the New Testament.
3. Make a plan to serve as a member of the Christian’s holy and royal priesthood per 1 Peter 2:5, 9.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Ordination
- B. Lesson Context

I. Preparing the Offerings (Exodus 29:1-3)

- A. Animals and Bread (vv. 1-2)
- B. Collection and Presentation (v. 3)
God, the Painter?

II. Preparing the Ordinands (Exodus 29:4-9)

- A. Persons, Place, and Purification (v. 4)
- B. Aaron, Attire, and Anointing (vv. 5-7)
- C. Descendants, Dress, and Duration (vv. 8-9)
Hand-Me-Down Clothes

III. Requiring a Week (Exodus 29:35-37)

- A. For the Priests (v. 35)
- B. For the Altar (vv. 36-37)

Conclusion

- A. The Old in the New
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

all translations of today's lesson text, although the concept is present. For example, the *King James Version* uses the verb *ordain* in a situation of gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 9:22) and the appointment of unqualified priests (2 Chronicles 11:15).

Within the new nation of Israel, God planned for men of the tribe of Levi to be designated with tasks associated with the tabernacle and (later) the temple (Numbers 3:5-9; 8:5-26; 1 Chronicles 23:28-32). From this tribe were to come the priests (Deuteronomy 18:1-5; Joshua 18:7; contrast 1 Kings 12:31). Priests were mediators between God and the people. In this role, priests offered sacrifices for atonement on their behalf (Leviticus 4:13-35; 9:7); priests were to teach and model God's distinctions between clean and unclean (10:10-11).

Setting the stage for today's lesson is Exodus 28:41, which summarizes the detail that follows in Exodus 29 regarding the ordination of priests. Leviticus 8 offers a detailed account of Moses carrying out the actions God specifies in today's lesson text.

I. Preparing the Offerings

(Exodus 29:1-3)

A. Animals and Bread (vv. 1-2)

1a. "This is what you are to do to consecrate them, so they may serve me as priests:

The word *you* refers to Moses, as traced back to Exodus 25:1. Thus, the instructions that follow are for him to carry out as God's designated representative to the people.

The word translated *consecrate* also appears in Exodus 28:41 (see Lesson Context) and 29:36-37 (see commentary below). It is the verb form of the noun regularly translated "holy." The idea of holiness is pervasive in the Law of Moses and the history of Israel. It has the sense of emulating God in being "set apart" as pure and undefiled. It is the opposite of that which is unclean or profane (Leviticus 10:10). Specific rules for priests in this regard were stricter than those for the rank-and-file Israelites (Exodus 21:1-22:16). Even so, the requirement for personal holiness isn't just for priests under the old covenant—it's for every-

one (1 Peter 1:15-16, quoting Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2).

Note the sequence here: being made holy is a prerequisite to ministering *as priests*, not the other way around!

1b. "Take a young bull and two rams without defect.

The process of ordination for the priests was costly! For all three animals to be *without defect* meant they were not sick or deformed in any way. This was not to be used as an opportunity to get rid of inferior livestock. These animals were to be sacrificed according to detailed instructions (Exodus 29:10-28, not in today's text). As they were sacrificed, they were given separate and distinct designations (29:14, 18, 26; Leviticus 8:14, 18, 27).

2. "And from the finest wheat flour make round loaves without yeast, thick loaves without yeast and with olive oil mixed in, and thin loaves without yeast and brushed with olive oil.

Three distinct manner of bread were specified for the ordination. But despite their differences, they all have one thing in common: they are unleavened (made *without yeast*). Up to this point in Bible history, there have been two incidents associated with unleavened bread. The lesser-known incident involved the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:3); the better-known incident was the Passover and its subsequent remembrances (Exodus 12). Both situations involved a need for haste—yeasted bread would have taken too long to rise.

Specifications for offerings involving bread, flour, etc., are found in Leviticus 2. How these were to be used in the ordination ceremony is

How to Say It

Abihu	Uh-bye-hew.
Eleazar	El-ih-a-zar or E-lih-a-zar.
ephod	ee-fod.
Gomorrah	Guh-more-uh.
Ithamar	Ith-uh-mar.
Nadab	Nay-dab.
Sodom	Sod-um.

specified in Exodus 29:23-25 (not in today's lesson text) and Leviticus 6:19-23. How they were actually used is recorded in Leviticus 8:26-29.

The specification that these breads were to be made with *wheat flour* is itself revealing. Both barley and wheat were characteristic grain crops in the promised land (Deuteronomy 8:8). But barley was the food of the poor; Revelation 6:6 suggests that barley was one-third the cost of wheat. Thus, we see a certain parallel with the requirement to bring an unblemished animal—the bread to be offered had to be made with the best flour.

What Do You Think?

How might the concept of “unleavened” apply to modern-day believers?

Digging Deeper

How do Matthew 16:6 and 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 direct your response?

Consider the preliminary tasks of a painter. Every experienced painter knows that the ultimate success or failure of a job depends on *surface preparation*. Before the brush is dipped into the paint, the area to be painted needs to be cleaned in various ways for the new paint to adhere properly. God was taking care to do likewise in the text at hand. By means of meticulous instructions, he was preparing hearts to recognize the seriousness of the task at hand. His Word won't adhere to unprepared hearts, whether under the old covenant or the new.

The end result of God's work of preparing hearts is connected to our own receptivity to that preparatory work. How do you see this playing out in the contrast between the shallow and good soils of Matthew 13:5-8? —R. L. N.

II. Preparing the Ordinands

(Exodus 29:4-9)

A. Persons, Place, and Purification (v. 4)

4. “Then bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance to the tent of meeting and wash them with water.”

Exodus 40:12 is worded almost identically to the verse before us. The positioning of that verse reinforces the chronological element here: the ordination took place after *the tent of meeting* (the tabernacle) had been set up.

The tabernacle proper was a portable tentlike structure (Exodus 26:1-37; 36:8-38). It was situated inside a courtyard, to the courtyard's west side (27:9-19; 38:9-20). Once the tabernacle was operational, its Most Holy Place was to be entered by the high priest only, and only on the Day of Atonement (see lesson 5 on Leviticus 16). But with the tabernacle's completion, there was no priesthood in general or high priest in particular to use it! Thus, the need for ordaining *Aaron and his sons*.

The entrance to the tent of meeting faced east: where Moses was to bring the ordinands. There, the men were to be washed with water, a ceremonial cleansing to begin the ordination ceremony. Washing with water in a ceremonial sense is also noted in Exodus 30:17-22; Leviticus 14:8-9; 15:4-

B. Collection and Presentation (v. 3)

3. “Put them in a basket and present them along with the bull and the two rams.”

The exacting nature of the instructions reveals how important and serious this ceremony should be in the eyes of the Israelites. This is not some impromptu ritual. We can easily imagine the animals were cleaned and groomed, and the bread was made by the finest cooks. The *basket* itself would be of the best craftsmanship, fit for this solemn occasion.

We may view the results in terms of a visual aid. This occasion was not to be a “by invitation only plus one” event. All Israelites were to witness the ordinations (Leviticus 8:1-4). Even so, we are left to wonder how this was accomplished in a practical sense since the Israelites at the time numbered about 600,000 men, not counting women and children (Exodus 12:37; Numbers 1:46)!

God, the Painter?

Have you ever heard the word “painter” used as a description of God? I never have. Various descriptions of God abound in Scripture, but “painter” is not one of them. Even so, I think it fits.

27; etc. Moses followed God's instructions exactly (Leviticus 8:6).

The sons of Aaron were four in number; their names were Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar (Numbers 26:60). The first two lost their lives when they offered "unauthorized fire before the Lord" (Leviticus 10:1-2). That happened after the ordination ceremony, so all four were present to become priests (Exodus 28:1; Numbers 3:2-4).

What Do You Think?

What can you teach others regarding valid and invalid connections between baptism and Aaron's washing with water?

Digging Deeper

How are 1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:4-7; and Hebrews 10:19-22 relevant?

B. Aaron, Attire, and Anointing (vv. 5-7)

5. "Take the garments and dress Aaron with the tunic, the robe of the ephod, the ephod itself and the breastpiece. Fasten the ephod on him by its skillfully woven waistband."

Priestly *garments* are first mentioned comprehensively in Exodus 28:1-5, with 28:31-43 adding detail. A fleeting reference occurs in 25:7.

There were several parts to this unique uniform. The first is here called a *tunic*, but it has a longer designation of "woven tunic" in Exodus 28:4. This close-fitting shirt-like garment was made of fine linen (28:39; 39:27). It is not to be confused with the linen undergarment of 28:42; 39:28.

The robe of the ephod is an outer garment. Particulars regarding its features and functions are found in Exodus 28:31-35; 39:22. Creation of the ephod itself is addressed in 28:6-14; 39:2-7. It may have been something like an apron.

What is called *the breastpiece* here is further designated "the breastpiece of decision" in Exodus 28:29; this item's construction of gold, precious stones, and fine linen is covered extensively there and in 39:8-21. Not mentioned in the lesson text for today are "the Urim and the Thummim" that fit into the breastpiece (28:30). We don't know exactly what these were, but their

function seemed to be a means of consulting God regarding important decisions (example: Numbers 27:18-21).

Similar to that of the ephod was the material of the *woven waistband* (Exodus 28:8; 39:5). This item was to interconnect with the breastpiece and ephod in a manner that would prevent unintended movement of the breastpiece (28:28).

6. "Put the turban on his head and attach the sacred emblem to the turban."

As clothing items for the torso were to be interconnected, so too were items for the high priest's *head*. The *turban* was the headdress, and *the sacred emblem* was something attached to it.

We don't really know what the turban looked like beyond the brief descriptions in Exodus 28:4, 37; 39:30. On the other hand, Exodus 28:36-38 is most helpful in providing information about the sacred emblem in terms of (1) its nature of solid gold, (2) its engraved message of holiness, (3) its function of the high priest's bearing of guilt, and (4) its attachment to the front of the headdress.

Again, the word *put* indicates commands to Moses. He obeyed all these instructions to the letter during the actual ordination ceremony (Leviticus 8:7-9).

7. "Take the anointing oil and anoint him by pouring it on his head."

The text now shifts focus from the high priest's vestments to his anointing. *The anointing oil* was a mixture of olive oil and four fine spices (Exodus 30:22-25). This use of this formulation was highly restricted, what one might call "divinely proprietary" (30:26-33).

What Do You Think?

In what cases would you initiate an anointing with oil?

Digging Deeper

How do Mark 6:13 and James 5:14-15 inform your response?

C. Descendants, Dress, and Duration (vv. 8-9)

8-9a. "Bring his sons and dress them in tunics and fasten caps on them. Then tie sashes on Aaron and his sons."



Offer pleasing sacrifices to God.

Visual for Lessons 3 & 4. Display this visual as you ask the discussion questions associated with the lesson conclusion.

Regarding the names and number of Aaron's *sons*, see commentary on Exodus 29:4, above. They were the nephews of Moses, who was still receiving instructions regarding their ordination to be priests. After they had been ceremonially washed (Exodus 29:4), they would be ready to receive the garments prepared for them.

Comparing the sons' *tunics*, *caps*, and *sashes* with the clothing of their father is insightful. The results of such a comparison classifies the garments in terms of (1) those common to both father and sons, (2) those unique to the father, and (3) those unique to the sons.

In Exodus 29:5-6, considered above, we saw that Aaron was to be given seven articles of attire to constitute his vestments. An eighth item was a "sash," noted in 28:4, 39. (We are not counting a ninth item of underwear in 28:42; 39:28.) Of these eight items, only two—tunics and sashes—were common to both father and sons (28:4, 39-40; 29:5, 8; 39:27; 40:14; note: the "waistband" of 29:5 is different from the "sashes" of 29:9). Clothing attributed to the sons only is the headgear known as "caps" (28:40; 39:28).

It's easy to focus so much on these details that we lose sight of the bigger picture. That bigger picture is found in God's stated intent for these vestments to evoke a sense of "dignity" and "honor" regarding the priesthood (Exodus 28:2, 40).

9b. "The priesthood is theirs by a lasting

ordinance. Then you shall ordain Aaron and his sons.

The words in the original language translated *lasting ordinance* occur about two dozen times in the Old Testament. In addition to describing the enduring nature of *the priesthood* (compare Exodus 40:15), it also describes priestly tasks (examples: 27:21; Leviticus 24:3).

Hand-Me-Down Clothes

Whenever family discussions turn to the subject of hand-me-down clothes, it's usually not with a positive tone! But there is at least one positive case, and it's a big one: the clothing of ancient Israel's high priest was to be passed along from generation to generation (Exodus 29:29-30). This set of clothing was considered so valuable that the first-century Jewish historian Josephus noted that it came under the control of King Herod and then his son Archelaus (the same ones of Matthew 2:1, 22), followed by Roman authorities.

While the priestly clothing of Aaron and his sons was intended to be impressive, it was not the most important aspect of their consecration. The most important thing was that the priestly office was an enduring gift (Numbers 18:7).

The same can be said of our new covenant priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). Do you treat it that way?
—M. S. K.

III. Requiring a Week

(Exodus 29:35-37)

A. For the Priests (v. 35)

35. "Do for Aaron and his sons everything I have commanded you, taking seven days to ordain them.

This verse summarizes the intricacies of the ordination process *for Aaron and his sons* as set forth in Exodus 29:10-34 and Leviticus 8. Some students propose that its requirement to last *seven days* was an intended parallel to the seven days of creation, ending on the Sabbath day.

The seven days could also have served as a necessary period of familiarization with God's required actions. In Leviticus 8:35, Moses stressed

the seven-day requirement and the deadly consequences of not honoring it. Two of Aaron's four sons died for a different violation shortly after their seven days were completed (Leviticus 9:1; 10:1-3).

What Do You Think?

What kinds of "waiting periods" do you need to adopt personally?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture convicts you most in this regard?

B. For the Altar (vv. 36-37)

36. "Sacrifice a bull each day as a sin offering to make atonement. Purify the altar by making atonement for it, and anoint it to consecrate it."

The tabernacle was equipped with two altars: one of about 56 square feet in area for animal sacrifices (Exodus 27:1-9) and another, smaller altar of less than 3 square feet in area for burning incense (30:1-10). *The altar* in view here is the sacrificial altar. This altar was the place where the priests did most of their work (Hebrews 10:11).

A sin offering was a means of *atonement*; Leviticus 4 explains this in detail. The need to *purify the altar . . . to consecrate it* is addressed in Leviticus 16 (lesson 5).

37. "For seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy."

The fact that *whatever touches* the altar *will be holy* is quite remarkable given that it is the opposite of the normal laws of defilement. When "clean" and "unclean" come into contact with one another, the regular pattern is that the clean becomes unclean (Leviticus 5:2-3; Haggai 2:11-13; etc.). Jesus took as given that the altar sanctifies the sacrificial gift on it (Matthew 23:19).

Conclusion

A. The Old in the New

The importance of today's lesson is seen in the fact that ordination to the priesthood was

instructed in Exodus 29, carried out in detail in Leviticus 8, and viewed as an accomplished fact in Exodus 40. Such repetition should catch our attention!

Even so, we may wonder about modern relevance. Today's text describes persons and events from over 3,000 years ago. Aaron and Moses are long dead. Neither the tabernacle nor the Jerusalem temple stands today. A natural, perhaps instinctive way of seeing relevance is to see parallels between the ordination of priests in the Old Testament and the modern practice of ordaining ministers of the gospel. There is value in doing so, but that's not the primary point of relevance.

That primary relevance is at least twofold. The first is that the functions of the tabernacle, priests, and blood sacrifices form the framework for understanding Jesus' sacrifice as an atonement (propitiation) for our sins (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; etc.). The second concerns the fact and obligations of our own priesthood (Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5; etc.). We neglect facts of the old covenant as foundations for the new covenant at our peril (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11).

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to someone who says that Scripture texts like today's are meaningless to modern-day believers?

Digging Deeper

In what ways has your mindset regarding the Old Testament changed because of this lesson?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may we honor your plan to provide the priesthoods of both old and new covenants. Convict us on how we can do better at honoring our priesthood of all believers as it reflects your holiness. We pray this is the name of our great high priest, the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins, Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Honor your part in the priesthood of all believers.