**THE DOCTRINE OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST: PERSPECTIVES OF THE 1ST AND 2ND CENTURIES**

**CHRISTIAN WRITERS**

***Oleh Franklin Hutabarat***

**ABSTRAK**

Keimamatan Kristus adalah sebuah topik yang hanya sedikit tercatat dalam Alkitab. Di dalam Perjanjian Baru, keimamatan Kristus hanya ditemukan dalam kitab Ibrani, di mana Yesus disebut sebagai imam atau imam besar. Imam besar adalah figur penting dalam agama Yahudi. Di dalam setiap sistem keagamaan, imam (khususnya mengenai Imam besar) memiliki peran kunci untuk melaksanakan upacara-upacara. Bahkan pengaruhnya bukan sekedar dalam hal ibadah, tetapi kepada semua aspek dalam kehidupan umat percaya. Kekristenan, sebagai sebuah kelanjutan dan penerima warisan dari kepercayaan Yahudi, juga memiliki keimamatan khusus. Sama seperti imam besar pada sistem lama, maka di dalam agama “baru” atau Israel rohani, imam adalah figur penting. Di dalam artikel ini penulis akan menjawab pertanyaan, apakah pengertian dari gereja Kristen mula-mula mengenai doktrin keimamatan Kristus? Ditemukan bahwa pada abad pertama, keimamatan memiliki peran penting dalam masyarakat Mediterania Timur. Bagi orang Yunani dan Yahudi, keimamatan adalah elemen utama dalam keagamaan. Oleh sebab itu, keimamatan, membentuk dasar dari konsep keimamatan Kristen.

**INTRODUCTION**

The priesthood of Christ is a topic about which the Bible says very little. Nowhere in the New Testament, except in the Epistle to the Hebrews, is Jesus called a priest or a high priest.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jesus never claimed such a title for himself. However a high priest was a central figure in Jewish religion. It is expected to have been similarly important in the early church.

In English the word “priest” is derived from the Middle English *prest, preost.* Webster gives the meaning of priest as an authorized person, ordained to perform sacerdotal functions, especially in Jewish or Christian rites. The priest performs sacrificial, mediatorial, interpretative or ministerial functions.[[2]](#footnote-2) Other meanings of *priest* are given by the *Random House Dictionary*: (1) a person whose office is to perform religious rites; (2) a person ordained to the sacerdotal office or a member of a clergy of the order next bellow that of bishop; and (3) minister of any religion.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Siegfried Horn says that this English word is a contracted transliteration of the Latin *presbyter,* in turn from the Greek *presbuteros,* “elder.” The priest is “a person duly authorized to minister in sacred things as a mediator between man and God, and to offer sacrifices for the sins of men.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

William Gouge says that the word *priest* is a contracted from of a Greek word that signifies a president or one that is set over others, or put before them.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In any religious systems, the priest (especially the high priest) has a key role in exercising ritual. In fact the influence of this office goes beyond the worship or ritual into all aspects of the life of the believer.

Christianity, as a continuation and inheritor of the Jewish belief, also has its distinctive priesthood. Like the high priest of the old system, in this “new” religion or spiritual Israel, the high priest is also a central figure.

The doctrine of the priesthood of Christ appears clearly in only one of the canonical books of the New Testament: the Epistle to the Hebrews. Very little is said about this doctrine in Christian documents of the first centuries. Yes the concept of the priesthood cannot have been foreign to Christians, especially Jewish Christians, of the apostolic and sub apostolic times. The question raised is: what was the early Christian understanding of the doctrine of Christ’s priesthood?

When the Reformers declared “back to the Bible” and *Sola Scriptura* becomes their basic belief, there was little emphasis on the priesthood of Christ. One of the best indicators of this lack of emphasis is that there are so few books written on this subject.[[6]](#footnote-6) Essays on this subject are mostly contained in encyclopedias or theological dictionaries. It seems that Protestant theologians and writers have neglected this very important subject. This unbalance is a serious problem because it deals with the heart of sound Christian biblical doctrine.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Considering the problems that have been stated above, the purposes of the research are:

1. To determine how the early Christians, as represented by the writers of the first two centuries, understood the doctrine of priesthood of Christ.
2. To present a balanced Christological exposition of the priesthood of Christ.
3. To present an appropriate view of the role of Christ as a priest in light of New

Testament.

**DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

To study the priesthood of Christ means to study something that is invisible, beyond the perception of human physical senses. The only available sources are the Scriptures, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the New Testament Pseudigrapha.

The Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers are the main tools for this study. All sources are limited to the first two centuries. Other doctrines related to the priesthood of Jesus, such as sanctuary and offerings, will not be discussed. The topic is limited to Christ as high priest.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The New Testament concept of priesthood of Jesus, as expressed in Hebrews, did not arise in a vacuum. The early Christians were surrounded by concepts and ideas on the qualifications, task, and privileges of priest and high priest. To fully understand the Christian position as presented in Hebrews, one must be aware of how people in the first century saw priesthood.

This section outlines the main concept of priesthood among the people of the Eastern Mediterranean. The presentation is a survey rather than an in-depth analysis. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first notes ideas on priesthood among Gentiles. The second studies of priesthood among Jews.

GENTILE PRIESTHOOD

Nearly all religions around the Eastern Mediterranean were polytheistic. However, the religious elements present in those religions --- temple, priest, sacrifice, and prayer --- were also present in the monotheistic religion as believed by the Jews and Christians. Certain similarities existed.

The religions of three prominent people of the Eastern Mediterranean are explored: Roman, Greek, and Egyptian. In Rome, Mithraism was the most popular religion, especially among soldiers. At the same time the emperor cult was a new phenomenon in the first century. In Egypt, Serapis, Isis, and Osiris were worshiped. These gods were believed to be incarnate in the rulers, pharaohs, and queens. The most prominent Greek deity was Dionysus, who was regarded as the true son of Zeus.

The priesthood of the religions just noted is viewed in connection with the worship of their gods. In some cases these gods were worshiped in more than one place, even outside their original homeland. For example, Isis and Serapis were worshiped at Rome.[[7]](#footnote-7) Syncretism was another phenomenon of these religions. Anthony, a Roman, when he was in Egypt regarded Dionysus-Osiris as one god.[[8]](#footnote-8) The priesthood of these religions had a very important role in the lives of these nations.

ROMAN PRIESTHOOD

First-Century Roman religion was mainly marked by emperor worship. Augustus was deified. Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Commodus demanded to be worshiped. The actual object of the imperial cult was political.[[9]](#footnote-9) A well organized priesthood supported by the state was established to meet the imperial purposes.

Another determinant form of paganism was that of the mystery religions. The worship of Mithras, Isis, Cybele, Dionysus, and other mystery cults were popular in Roma as well as in the other parts of Roman Empire. Each individual god demanded his/her own priesthood. Little is known about the qualifications, duties, and privileges of these priests.

The main criteria for the priesthood of the emperor cult were: (1) free birth; (2) Roman citizenship; (3) an unblemished civil record; (4) absence of physical infirmities;[[10]](#footnote-10) and (5) membership in leading families.[[11]](#footnote-11) A Roman priest might be male or female.[[12]](#footnote-12)

There were eleven levels in the priestly organization: (1) *Collegium pontificum,* (2) *Augurs,* (3) *Quindecimvri sacris faciundis,* (4) *Septmvirii epulones,* (5) *Sodales fesiales,* (6) *Fratres Arvales,* (7) *Salii,* (8) *Sodales Tatii,* (9) *Luperci,* (10) *Sodales Augustales,* (11)State priests of municipal cults and (12) *Haruspices.*[[13]](#footnote-13) The tasks of the priests were closely connected to the group which he belonged.

The *pontifex maximus,* the emperor himself, was the chief of the *Collegium pontificum.* The office of *pontifex maximus* was accorded great importance. Augustus considered it wise to take on this function in addition to his imperial position in 12 B.C. “As ‘Chief Priest’ he was able to restore and consolidate the state cult as yet another bulwark for his rule.[[14]](#footnote-14) His office was in “connection with vows.” He officiated when there was an “Outbreak of pestilence or at the beginning of a war, or on the occasion of the annual vows on 1st Jan; which were pronounced by the consul or other magistrate, who repeated the words after the *pontifex maximus.*”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The priests who belonged to the group of *Solades Augustales* were to perform the rites of the emperor worship. Asking signs from Jupiter to other gods was done by the *Augurs,* headed by the oldest *augur.*[[16]](#footnote-16)

The official priests in Rome enjoyed respect and privileges. Among these privileges were: (1) funds provided by the state; (2) servants to serve them; (3) residences for some; (4) the wearing of the *toga, prostexta*;and (5) “exemption from civil and military duties.[[17]](#footnote-17)

EGYPTIAN PRIESTHOOD

Egyptian religion had a long tradition, but it also had room innovations brought from abroad. Gods such as Amon, Hathor, Anubis, Thoth, Isis, Osiris, and Horus[[18]](#footnote-18) had been venerated for millennia before the first century A.D. The pharaoh was considered as divine or as representative of the gods. In the first century B.C., Egypt came under the Roman authority and its rulers received the homage, the divine-human pharaohs had claimed for themselves. For example, Augustus was worshiped; Cleopatra was regarded as Isis; Anthony was considered to be Osiris. Syncretism was accepted without difficulty.

In the time of Ptolemies, men and women could serve as priest and pristeses. The qualifications for admission into priesthood were as follows: (1) the candidates should come from priestly families; (2) they should have no physical defects; (3) the male priest should be circumcised; and (4) the high priest must “have been appointed by the King.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Bowman added that they should be the men of ability to read the sacred texts in hieratic and demotic.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The main task of Egyptian priests was to conduct the temple service. For example, “The Egyptian priesthood celebrated the new king in the way that had come down from the Pharaohs of old. At the birth temple in Hermonthis the god Re is represented as coming to Cleopatra in the form of Caesar.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

The priests were also magicians, judges and doctors—the combination of physician and priestly confessions.[[22]](#footnote-22) Priests were responsible to teach and learning and wisdom of Egypt: “The Egyptians are called the teachers of true religion.”[[23]](#footnote-23) They had the tasks of creating liturgies and religious texts, keeping the property of the gods, managing the income of the temple, supervising mummification, and conducting funeral ceremonies. They were to be “stewards of all the mysteries of heaven and earth.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Priests were free from forced labor, taxation, impost, and polltax. These were some of the privileges enjoyed by the Egyptian priests. They also received payment from “daily and incidental offerings.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

GREEK PRIESTHOOD

The Greek priesthood did not have hierarchical structure like that of the Romans. The priests were not a special class in the society. Although each god had his or her own priest, priesthood was only a part-time activity. There were no institutions for training the priests. The “only true religious professionals in Greece were the seers.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Plato wrote of the qualifications of the priests. His criteria were that priest should be around sixty. He “must be sound and perfect in body, and of pure and genuine civic pedigree.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Among the Greeks, the chief priest and priestess were unusually chosen by election.[[28]](#footnote-28) Other priests obtained their office by inheritance. Some might become priests by purchasing the priesthood right.

Due to the great varieties of cults, there were no specific qualifications for priesthood. But as a general regulation, no foreign priests were allowed to perform religious rites, especially at Athens.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In contrast to the Egyptians, the Greek priests did not function as teachers. Their liturgical and administrative tasks were interchangeable. Originally, there is no doubt, the priest must actually have performed the sacrifice, slaying the victim with his own hand and dismembering it for offering, assisted by the worshipers and the temple servants.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Priesthood was considered highly desirable. Those who held this position had the right to a seat of honor in the theater. They could wear any clothes they wished and also were entitled to wear a golden ivy crown.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The privileges of the Greek priests may be summarized, freedom from taxes and war service, right to a seat of honor and perquisites. The priestesses of Athens received fifty drachma a year for their salary.[[32]](#footnote-32)

JEWISH PRIESTHOOD

There were similarities of the basic role of the Jewish priesthood to the priesthood of the surrounding religions. They all performed mediatorial functions, placing them in a special class of the societies. Yet there were some distinctions. The Jewish priesthood served the only God, Yahweh. Jewish priesthood provided the root of the Christian concept of the priesthood of Christ.

This survey covers two areas: the biblical history and the first-century Jewish Priesthood. Both are important as background to the doctrine of Christ’s priesthood.

**BIBLICAL HISTORY**

The history of Jewish Priesthood began at the Exodus, ca. 1450 B.C. Before that time, however, priesthood was already a function of the patriarch. Israel was theocratic nation. The sanctuary, and later the temple, was the center of their religious activities. The priesthood was established to serve the sanctuary service.

The tribe of Levi, one of the twelve tribes of Israel was responsible for priestly activities. The priesthood was limited to Aaron and his descendants (Exod. 29:1-27; Num. 3-4). Later on, according to Ezek 44, the priests came only from the family of Zadok.

However, in the second century B.C., the Maccabean kingly priests, not of Zadokean lineage,[[33]](#footnote-33) occupied the position of high priest. That the priests were not descendants of Zadok became a source of dissensions. Those who claimed to be the “sons of Zadok” formed the Qumran community and refused to take part in the temple

service. The Essenes “diverged from their fellow-Jews was in refusing to participate in the temple cult.[[34]](#footnote-34)

According to the Mosaic Law, the priesthood was reserved for males only. No female priestesses are recorded in Jewish history. A candidate for priesthood should be a man without blemish (Lev. 21).

A priests’ function was life-long. Levine lists five tasks or functions of the Jewish priesthood: (1) cultic functions; (2) oracular; (3) therapeutic functions; (4) instructional and judicial functions; and (5) administrative functions.[[35]](#footnote-35) Num. 18:1-5 specifies the main tasks of the priests and the Levites in their connection to the tabernacle and its services. The religious tasks of the high priest were to “preside at the Day of Atonement and other major festivals.[[36]](#footnote-36)

According to the Mosaic Law, the tribe of Levi did not inherit a certain territory of Canaan. To them were given town and pastures around the towns (Num. 35:4). Priests received tithe and offerings from the people (Num. 18:8-32), and in “the post-exilic age the priests, especially the priestly families of Jerusalem, became a wealthy and powerful ruling class.[[37]](#footnote-37)

**FIRST CENTURY PRIESTHOOD**

In first-century Judaism there were different kinds of priests. First there were those accepted by the establishment. These functioned mainly in Jerusalem, but also in the Diaspora. They belonged to two parties: Pharisees and Sadducees. Secondly, there were priests who had separated themselves from Jerusalem temple services in protest against the corruption of descendants of the Hasmoneans. The best known of these were Essenes of the Qumran community. Thirdly, there was a totally separate Samaritan priesthood, with which the Jews of the first century were familiar. A survey of the conceptual priesthood in first century Judaism would be incomplete without the inclusion of ideas gleaned from the writings of two prominent Jewish authors: Philo and Josephus.

This section contains a survey of the concept of priesthood in the three factions of Judaism and in the writings of Philo and Josephus. Especially noted are qualifications, tasks, and privileges of priests. Mentions are also made of the understanding of the persons and functions of the high priest.

NORMATIVE JUDAISM

In Jerusalem, as well as in the Diaspora, Jewish priests exercised their functions. Since the temple and the high priest were in Jerusalem, the center of priestly activity was also in that city. Little can be said about priesthood in Diaspora; the topic is not considered here. Jewish scholarship and practice were not unanimous about religious matters. Two principal parties dominated the scene: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The ideas of priesthood of each group are described in the following sections.

PHARISEES

In the first half of the first century A.D., Pharisee priests were fewer and perhaps less influential than their Sadducee brothers. However, by the time of destruction of the temple the number of Pharisee priests had increased.

The Pharisee party held to the Levitical purity of the Priesthood. They were not willing to accept non-Levites as priests. In fact, the Pharisees often criticized the secularism of the Sadducees and found fault with the way priests acted.

The Mishnah, the oldest of surviving rabbinical literature, speaks repeatedly about priests and priesthood. To a great extent, the Mishnah reflects Pharisaical thinking. Thus we read that “blemished [priests] . . . do not offer up [sacrifice].[[38]](#footnote-38) The Talmud notes that a high priest should be:

Highest among his brethren, that means he should be highest among his brethren in strength, in beauty, in wisdom and in riches.[[39]](#footnote-39)

When he prayed Bible says, “Oh Lord” in Jerusalem, “his voice was heard in Jericho.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

One of the most important tasks of a high priest was to perform rites on the Day of Atonement. Seven days before that day he should be set apart “from his house to the councilors’ chamber.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The tasks for the common priests were to serve in the sanctuary for daily sacrifices,[[42]](#footnote-42) and to watch the room of Abtinas, the room of the flame, and the room of the hearth.[[43]](#footnote-43) They were also butchers. R. Hisda’s advice appears in the Talmud. “A priest [a butcher] who does not give the dues [to another priest] is to be put under the ban of the Lord God Israel.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

The Talmud records special privileges for the priest, “*And thou shalt sanctify him* [the priest] *for he offereth the brad of thy God,* which means, [sanctify him] in every matter appertaining to hallowed things, to be first to begin, first to say grace, first to take fair portion.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

SADDUCEES

Both the Sadducee and the Qumran community called themselves the “sons of Zadok.” The Sadducees probably emerged after the Hasmoneans took over the office of the high priest. This aristocratic priestly partly based their belief on the Pentateuch. They disagreed with the Pharisees on many aspects of Jewish thinking. For their involvement in the Jewish War (66-70), this party was eliminated after the destruction of the temple. The Sadducees did not leave any writings. Their beliefs are mainly reconstructed from the works of Josephus and the New Testament.

The Sadducees, who called themselves “sons of Zadok” demanded Zadokite lineage for the office of priesthood. For burning the red heifer, the Sadducees demanded higher purity of the priest than that of the Pharisees.[[46]](#footnote-46) All qualifications for the priesthood had to be based on the Pentateuch, the only biblical writings Sadducees accepted as normative.

Before A.D. 70, the temple was the center of activities of the Jewish priesthood. Since the Sadducee party was a priestly party, the main tasks of the priest must have been in the temple. The high priest was the president of the Sanhedrin, which was mainly a political function.

The Sadducees were an aristocratic ruling party. Indications are that they were also rich. “Active in political and economic life, the Sadducean partly was composed largely of the wealthier elements of the population-priests, merchants and aristocrats.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

ESSENE PRIESTHOOD

The sect of the Essenes was one of the three sects within Judaism, together with the Sadducees and Pharisees. The origin of this sect is obscure. “No solution ot the question of the origin of Essenes is likely to emerge from our sources.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The Qumran community was “probably a part of the Essenism known mostly from Josephus.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Pliny testifies that they occupied the near are near En-Gedi; “this fits well with the ruins discovered at Qumran.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Most probably Qumran was the center of the Essenes movement. Qumran was destroyed in A.D. 68 by Roman armies[[51]](#footnote-51) due to their support of the Jewish revolt. This destruction terminated the occupation of Qumran and the existence of the Essenes.

“The Qumran community is a priestly community.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Thus the priests had a dominant role and the founder of this community—the Teacher of Righteousness—was a priest. In addition the sect “may have extended priestly rules of holiness to non-priests.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

Although marriage was not forbidden, celibacy seems to have been preferred by the members of this community.[[54]](#footnote-54) In this community “Aaron’s lineage has the first place and honor above all others.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Since the Essenes were a branch of Judaism, there would be no female priests.

The tasks of the priest involved ritual and non-ritual affairs. However, priests did not perform regular service as held at the Jerusalem temple. There was no animal sacrifice.[[56]](#footnote-56) It was the task of a priest to offer prayer at the common meal. No one was “allowed to taste it until the priest” offered a prayer. After eating the priest prayed again.[[57]](#footnote-57) Pronouncing the final word on the matter of doctrine was also one of the specific tasks of Essenes priests.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Some of their non-ritual tasks were to be Judge in a tribunal of ten, with two priests in a tribunal of twenty[[59]](#footnote-59) and “to receive the incomes of their revenues, and of fruits of the ground.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The priest was also a *mebagger* or “overseer.” He had responsibility for discipline, for accepting reports, for teaching, for pasturing, and for selecting the candidates.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The privileges of the priest were the “special right in the annual plenary convention” and to “determine authoritatively the order and life of the whole community.”[[62]](#footnote-62) A priest had the chance of becoming “priest-president-general.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

Priests were not required to swear loyalty to Herod.[[64]](#footnote-64) The monarch regarded them as trustworthy.

The Essene community also expected the coming of the Messiah. For them, the Messiah would be priest and king. This was another evidence of their understanding of priestly authority.

SAMARITAN PRIESTHOOD

Samaritan religion was a mixture of Judaism and paganism (cf. 2 Kgs. 17:29), brought to Samaria by the people transferred by the Assyrians.[[65]](#footnote-65) In the third century B.C. the Samaritans built a sanctuary on Mt. Gerizim as the center of their worship.

The Jewish nature of the Samaritan religion is evidenced by their acceptance of the Pentateuch. “The Samaritans were at one with the Jews in their strict adherence to the Law of Moses, so for both groups the Pentateuch was their greatest authority.”[[66]](#footnote-66) “The religion of the Samaritans did not differ much from that of the Jews in the time of Christ, for with them they accepted of the Pentateuch.”[[67]](#footnote-67)

The founder of the Samaritan priesthood may have been a member of the family of Jerusalem’s high priest.[[68]](#footnote-68) The Samaritan priests claimed to be descendants of Eleazar. For them “the Jewish priesthood was descended from Ithamar, while theirs traced its origin to Eleazer.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

The Samaritan priest must be a perfect male.[[70]](#footnote-70) According to Lev. 21, the priest should be a male; thus, there would be no priestess in the Samaritan religion.

The Samaritan priests were responsible for marriage and circumcision ceremonies. Only the high priest had the authority to permit a husband to divorce his wife.[[71]](#footnote-71) The other important task of the Samaritan high priest was to prepare a calendar for religious festivals on “the Days of Simmuth, sixty days before Passover and sixty days before the Festival of Booths (Sukkot).”[[72]](#footnote-72) Preparing the sacred calendar the privilege of priests, for among the Samaritans, “the priests and Levites are never allowed a class of lay religious scholars to develop as in Judaism.”[[73]](#footnote-73) On the Days of Simmuth and the Festival of Booths, “The half-shekel prescribed by the Law (Ex. 30:13f) was supposed to be paid to the high priest. These payments, together with the tithes, made up the major part of his very slander income.”[[74]](#footnote-74)

Religious affairs were not the only tasks of the Samaritan priests. Theirs was another social function. The high priest and the priests also served as judges of the community.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The high priest had supreme authority over the rulers, because they must be subject to his wisdom and authority. “Without the High-Priesthood there could be not true, divinely ordained rulership.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

Some scholars believe that Samaritan priests had an important role in formulating orthodox Samaritan theology.[[77]](#footnote-77) The Samaritans had an eschatological expectation for the coming of the restorer. They were waiting for the Messiah. To them the Messiah had a three-fold status: prophet, priest, and king. The messiah should be “as a prophet who restores everywhere the true doctrine (cf. Jn. 4:25), but also as priest and king.”[[78]](#footnote-78) However, the Messiah in their expectation should not be Davidic.[[79]](#footnote-79)

**JEWISH WRITERS**

PHILO

Philo of Alexandria, also known as Philo Judaeus (ca. 13 B.C. –between A.D. 45 and 50) was a first-century Jewish philosopher and theologian. Philo had a thorough understanding of Greek literature, learning and philosophy. He also was well versed in rabbinical interpretation and Hebrew Scriptures. Towards the end of his life, he was the leader of the Alexandrian Jewish embassy to the Emperor Gaius Germanicus (Caligula) to request that Alexandrian Jews be exempted from emperor worship. Philo tried to harmonize Greek philosophy (Platonism) and Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Pentateuch.

Philo called the Levites the guardians. This indicates their tasks. Levites should serve for only twenty-five years, beginning at the age of twenty-five and retiring at fifty. The Levites were wise men of a perfect and cleansed mind; they had the truth.[[80]](#footnote-80) Philo says that the main task of the Levites was to do “active ministry and service of God.”[[81]](#footnote-81)

Philo said that the high priest had “to offer the ancestral prayer and sacrifice.” It was this task to be the representative of his people.[[82]](#footnote-82)

In an allegory of the whole universe as “the highest and true temple of God,” Philo says that the angels are its priests.[[83]](#footnote-83) Although he does not mention the Logos as the priest, he quotes the words of Moses in Deut. 5:5, “And I stood between the Lord and you,” as the words of Logos. For him the Logos has a mediatorial role.[[84]](#footnote-84) Philo also calls Moses chief priest.[[85]](#footnote-85)

JOSEPHUS

Jospehus (37-cs. 100 A.D.) was a Jewish general in Jewish war for the district of Galilee, until he surrendered to the Roman troops in 67 at Jotapata in Galilee. Later Josephus served the Roman Emperor and adopted the Caesar’s family name. Thus he was called Flavius Josephus. His well known works are: *The Jewish War* (ca. 75. A.D.), *The Antiquities of the Jews* (ca. 93 A.D.), *Life (Vita),* and *Against Apion.* Since he was a priest, his views on priesthood, reflect his interest in his office.

According to Josephus the priests should (1) be the “posterity of Aaron”[[86]](#footnote-86) and (2) not “maimed.”[[87]](#footnote-87) The high priest should (1) not be “the son of a captive woman;”[[88]](#footnote-88) (2) “succeed by birth;” and (3) marry a virgin.[[89]](#footnote-89)

One of the tasks of the high priest was to serve in temple on the Sabbath-days, new moons and festivals.[[90]](#footnote-90) Another task was “to determine difficult causes” with “the prophets and Sanhedrim.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

The priests had enjoyed the privileges of being exempted from taxes since the time of Xerxes.[[92]](#footnote-92) They obtained portions of offerings and sacrifices.[[93]](#footnote-93) Priests could “wear a garment made of wool and linen, for that is appointed to be for the priests alone.”[[94]](#footnote-94) Priests enjoyed a position of great trust and a mark of nobility among their people.[[95]](#footnote-95)

**SUMMARY**

In the first-century, priesthood had an important role in the society of the people of the Eastern Mediterranean. For the Gentiles as well as the Jews, priesthood was a dominant element in religion. Thus, priesthood, with its duties and privileges, formed the background to the Christian concept of priesthood.

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37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
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39. B. Talmud *Yoma* 18a. According to *The Midrash* the high priest also should be superior in age, Rabbah Leviticus 26:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. B. Talmud *Yoma*, 20b-21a. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Mishnah *Yoma* 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 2:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Misnah *Tamid,* 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. B. Talmud *Hullin,* 132b. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. B. Talmud *Mo’ed Katan* 28b-29a. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. “The Torah lies down that the priest should take a bath of purification after the burning of the Heifer; he then remained unclean until the evening (Num. 19:3-8). The Sadducees wished him to burn the Heifer after he had become clean at sunset. Their view was therefore more demanding.” Emile Schurer, *The History of Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ,* 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973), 2:410. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
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50. Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber 12,* as quoted by James Moffat, “Essenes,” *ERE, 5:396.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
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54. Schurer, 2:570. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
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58. Schurer, 2:576. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid, 2:575. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Antiquities*, 18.1.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Schelkle, 4:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
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65. *SDABD,* s.v. “Samaritans.” [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
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