

# THE PRIESTHOODS OF MEN

by Hugh Winder Nibley

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LDS claims to priesthood are not unique in the world. There have been in the past, and there still are, hundreds of societies claiming to possess the only true priesthood on earth.<sup>1</sup> Historically many of these would seem to have priority, and many of their rites and ordinances appear to anticipate our own.<sup>2</sup> The real opposition to the true Church in every age has come not from rival doctrines but from rival priesthoods. Some knowledge of the priesthoods of men is necessary if one would avoid vain arguments and easy deceptions.

## 1. “Primitive” Priesthood.

There is no such thing. One theory holds that all priesthood is “primitive” because it does not change. Another school attributes this stability to a high degree of sophistication, priesthood being the *least* primitive thing on earth.

Innumerable studies of priesthood among non-literate peoples are available, but this lesson follows A. P. Elkin’s classic *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, which describes the highly developed rites, ordinances, organization and phenomenal mental powers of the most “primitive” priesthood in the world.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR LDS: The evolutionary concept does *not* apply to priesthood. The Aboriginal priest has as good a claim to ministry and a far higher standard of performance than is commonly found in the sectarian world.

## 2. Shamanism.

This well-documented type of priesthood seems to be the foundation of almost all ancient priestcraft, including that of the Egyptians and Babylonians. There are exhaustive studies on the subject.

SIGNIFICANCE: Shamanism shows that it is possible to establish states of mind in which remarkable things can be done. Such power is not necessarily divine. In Shamanism it is terribly frustrating.

## 3. Priests and Kings.

I have published a good deal on this subject. The King is the first ancestor and high-priest of the nation. He presides on earth as God does in heaven.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alternate version reads: “...whose claims in regard to priesthood are surprisingly like our own.”

<sup>2</sup> Insert: “It is priesthood which distinguished religion from mere speculation or philosophy.”

<sup>3</sup> Alternate version reads: “He presides at the Great Assembly as God in Heaven.”

But wherever we turn in ancient times the king, for all his holiness, is believed to be a *usurper* of priesthood.<sup>4</sup>

SIGNIFICANCE: The priesthoods of men are universally conceived as a quest for something that has been lost and is desperately missed. This motif receives great emphasis in early sources.

4. Abraham and Pharaoh.

A classic illustration to the above is the very ancient tradition of the rivalry between Abraham and Pharaoh, who was “blessed as to the kingship but cursed as to the priesthood.” Recent studies, especially by the German school of Egyptologists, supply astonishing confirmation of the Pearl of Great Price on this theme.

The rites of Egyptian priesthood (the Temple ordinances) are extremely significant for Latter-day Saints.

The Pharaoh as a conscious usurper.

The rule of priests in Egypt.

SIGNIFICANCE: Striking vindication both of the Pearl of Great Price and the Book of Mormon. Extremely close parallels to our own temple ordinances with admission by the Egyptians that they do not understand them.

5. Babylonian Priestcraft.

The Messiah theme in the Babylonian ordinances.

Temple rites: Creation, resurrection and exaltation of the King.

“Babylon the Great,” the classical symbol of false priesthood.

SIGNIFICANCE: Babylon ties world history together in the theme of priesthood. An unbroken succession of pretenders to the priesthood who on the authority of priesthood sought to conquer the world.

6. What is a Temple?

Recent and surprising discoveries: all ancient temples follow a single pattern.

Common characteristics of temples and temple ordinances.

All ancient temples now believed to have been imitations modeled on a single, lost original.

SIGNIFICANCE: There is no priesthood without a temple. Joseph Smith alone in his day knew what a temple really was and is.

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<sup>4</sup> Insert: “The Nimrod Cycle illustrates this well.

7. The Priests of Baal.

The new Ras Shamra fragments (Syrian temple archives, 1400 B.C.).  
Close affinities with the Old Testament; also with Babylonian, Egyptian, Hittite, Greek, Roman, and other priesthoods.

SIGNIFICANCE: The discovery of these records definitely establishes the common, single origin of all ancient priesthood.

8. Greek Priests and Prophets.

Greek rationalist thought is a late production of decadent schools. The great Greek thinkers were diligent seekers for revelation, and placed great emphasis on the doctrine that where there is no true priesthood there is no true knowledge. Plato and Aristotle were painfully aware of not having the priesthood – they wondered if Zoroaster might have it.

The traditional Greek ordinances, doctrines, and traditions are extremely close to the Hebrew.

SIGNIFICANCE: The recognition by the Greeks of the dependence of all true attainment [?] on priesthood.

9. Rome: a Priest-State.

Magistrates and priest-kings; all Roman office was priestly.  
The Imperial Cult, its Asiatic origin. It furnished the forms of Christian priesthood adopted in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

SIGNIFICANCE: This is the source of nearly all priestcraft as we know it today.

10. Insignia of Priesthood.

Badges of authority: staff, ring, throne, etc.  
Holy Vestments: Robes, aprons, mitres, etc.  
The stolen garment of the priesthood; an ancient and widespread tradition.

SIGNIFICANCE: Since the trappings of a priesthood can be traced back to their origins, so can the source of that priesthood.

11. Celtic Priestcraft.

Megalithic rites (as reported by early missionaries and confirmed by archaeology).  
The Druids.  
The Celtic Mythological Cycles.  
The Table Round and the Rituals of Chivalry.

SIGNIFICANCE: Illustrates the involvement of our ancestors in a very “Jewish” type of priesthood.

12. Nordic Priestcraft.

The Great Thing: office and authority of the Goths.  
The King as High Priest: the Yule and the Blot.  
Othinn as a Usurper of the Priesthood.  
The proto-Gospel in the Eddas.

SIGNIFICANCE: Clear indications of an earlier dispensation of the gospel.

13. The Persian Pattern.

Doctrines very close to our own but vitiated by priestcraft.  
Close Jewish affinities, Book of Mormon parallels, and a central position in Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic.

SIGNIFICANCE: It has been maintained that this is the center from which all earthly priesthood has been derived. Here, if anywhere, is the key to the problem.

14. Priesthood among the Jews.

Jewish apocalyptic sects all claim exclusive possession of the priesthood.  
Unofficial priesthood: Scribes, Pharisees, Rabbis.  
The Kabbalah attempts to revive the priesthood.  
Modern attempts to revive the Temple and the priesthood.

SIGNIFICANCE: The Jewish predicament concerns us. (Article 10)

15. Priesthood in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Apocryphal claims to priesthood.  
Priestly societies in the desert.

SIGNIFICANCE: Remarkable vindication of the Book of Mormon and of the LDS concept of priesthood.

16. The Two Priesthoods.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century controversy over the nature of priesthood in the Primitive Christian Church.  
The discovery of two priesthoods, a higher and lower, settles it.  
The usurpation of power by the episcopal office.

SIGNIFICANCE: Proves that the LDS concept of priesthood is the genuine Apostolic one.

17. Priesthood and the Gnostics.

After the passing of the Apostles many claimed to have their priesthood. The Gnostics put on a good show and proved once for all the bankruptcy of the pretended priesthood.

SIGNIFICANCE: The Gnostic phenomenon in many ways proves the loss of priesthood to the Church.

18. Misgivings of the Fathers.

The perplexities of Irenaeus, Origen, Chrysostom, et al. on the subject of the priesthood. Vain attempts of Justin, Eusebius, et al. to locate the priesthood.

SIGNIFICANCE: The Fathers admit a great deal more than historians have been willing to recognize.

19. Power and Gain.

Documents the steps by which the catholic clergy extended its power and holdings. The systematic development of the theory of unlimited priestly power. The systematic abuse of priestly power a historic Leit-motif.

SIGNIFICANCE: This explains why the institution of priesthood never dies out: it pays well.

20. Monasticism and Priesthood.

Harnack's theory that Monasticism was an attempt to keep priesthood alive by rescuing it from the church in which its survival had become impossible. Violent opposition of the official priesthood to the monks in the early years.

SIGNIFICANCE: An ambitious attempt to restore priesthods in its purity was a conspicuous failure.

21. Priestly Orders established in the Crusades.

Hospitalers, Knights of St. John, Teutonic Order, etc. Chivalric orders and Mendicants; their struggles for power and gain.

SIGNIFICANCE: Further attempts to restore the priesthood by resort to Oriental traditions and the "mystic experience" of symbolic initiation.

22. Priesthood in Islam.

Koresh, Shi'a sects, Druzes, Assassins & others.

SIGNIFICANCE: Determined to get away from priesthood, Islam soon ended up a mass of priestly societies. The weakness of the great claim to original revelation is shown in extreme dependence on going concerns.

23. Priesthood and the Pre-Reformation.

Numerous Pre-Reformation sects regarded themselves as the depositories of the priesthood which had reached them by secret channels.

SIGNIFICANCE: These Gnostic survivals make interesting claims while assuming that the mere claim is the equivalent of proof – it is not.

24. Priesthood and the Reformation.

Luther and the priesthood of all believers.  
Priesthood the principal object of controversy and the weakest point of Protestant doctrine.

SIGNIFICANCE: The struggles of the Protestants to invent a priesthood or to do without one are the best commentary on the need for a restoration of the gospel.

25. Priesthood and the Counter-Reformation.

It is not generally known that the Catholics have had as hard a struggle as the Protestants to “locate” priesthood.

The program of the Jesuits.  
Probabilism and the Great Moral Controversy.  
The Infallibility controversy.

SIGNIFICANCE: Shows the boasted certitudes of the Romanists on the subject of priesthood are a very recent thing. Formerly all was vague and ill-defined.

26. Earthly Degrees of Glory.

The ancient, Medieval and modern university are survivals from priestly societies.  
Conquest of Christian doctrine by the ancient University of Alexandria.  
Scholarly corporations of the Middle Ages: titles, vestments, initiations, etc.  
Mumbo-jumbo of modern intellectualism.

SIGNIFICANCE: The modern university as a direct descendent of ancient priestly societies retains their weak while rejecting their strong point; falls into the old priestly vice of emphasizing form at the expense of content.

27. Lodges and Benevolent Societies claiming Priesthood.

The Illuminati and the Gospel of Man.  
Sects of the Enlightenment.  
The Masons.

SIGNIFICANCE: Superficial resemblances and fundamental differences between such groups and the Mormons.

28. Pietistic and liberal attempts to abolish priesthood.

Sects whose renunciation of all ritualism has led to extreme ritualism.  
Organized abhorrence of organization (Transcendentalist, etc.)

SIGNIFICANCE: Demonstrates the apparent inability of men to get away from some form of priesthood.

29. LDS claims to an original Priesthood.

Horizontal versus vertical transmission of authority.  
Uniqueness and originality of Joseph Smith's claims.  
Present-day attempts to establish parallel claims.

SIGNIFICANCE: Our priesthood is not an offshoot of any other. Priesthood must be pure to be genuine.

30. Summary.

A "dispensation" is a restoration of the priesthood.  
Priesthood the great driving mechanism of world history.  
False priesthood plays a leading role in all the world's affairs.

SIGNIFICANCE: The Priesthoods of Men furnish a key to the true priesthood and an indispensable commentary on the ways of the world.

Reformatted by  
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