

Chike John Nwanze

**THE PRIEST: LEADING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY
AT WORSHIP**

By

Chike John Nwanze, PHD

St Albert the Great Major Seminary Idowu -Offonran,
Abeokuta, Ogun state Nigeria

Abstract

Pentateuch recounts the movement of the people of God from Egypt to the promised land. As they journeyed they worshipped God the way they knew best. As they became more sedentary, the institution of the priesthood began to gain greater importance. This can be seen by the improved manner of their worship of God. At different times and in various stages, they worshipped God according to the circumstance in which they found themselves. Over time, they developed some religious Institutions. Among them was the priesthood. The priest had a specific role. He was charged with the cultic responsibility. What this simply meant was that the priest had to concern himself with spiritual activities. His job had to do with establishing and maintaining relationship with God. This is done through the act of worship, which enables encounter with God. This essay, through the prism of Pentateuch examines the development of the priestly function, especially his role at worship. Utilizing Synchronic-diachronic approach while respecting Pentateuch canonical framework, the priest has been seen to occupy a central place in the worship tradition of the people. This role of the priest as a leader of the worshipping community will be helpful in the understanding of today's priest. It is in this light that the paper is unambiguous about the character of the priest in relation to leading at worship. The outcome of the research is that the priest while serving the people is expected to lead them to God through daily worship of God.

Key Words: God, Priest, Worship, Sacrifice, People, personal relationship

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the enactment of the Law on Mount Sinai¹, the Priesthood was yet to be instituted. Hence Sacrifices were offered by the head of the family (*Paterfamilias*).² The patriarchs were at the foundation of the life of the people of God-Israel. These were the first fathers of the people of Israel. As such, they became the first to exercise this office of presiding at the sacrificial altar. We find this play out in the life of Abraham (Gen 22:1-19) God commands Abraham to offer his only son, Isaac. This serves as a prototype of sacrifices. He was to offer Isaac as a holocaust to God. But he was exchanged for an animal. As soon as the animal was provided, Abraham killed it and performed the sacrifice to God as commanded.

The Patriarchs worshipped in Sanctuaries. A Sanctuary is a holy place where YHWH is present.³ The Israelite could actually identify these holy places or holy abodes. In the wilderness, it was the tent of meeting, while in the monarchic era, it was the temple. The presence of YHWH attracts the construction of an altar for sacrifice. Through this sacrifice, man encounters God in a profound way. Jacob after his many ordeals, built an altar to the Lord who had always been around him to support him in the days of his troubles (Gen 35:1-7). As a patriarch he offered sacrifice on the altar.

In continuation of the worship of God, although Moses was not counted amongst the patriarchs, he had a leadership role and almost could qualify for a patriarch. He experienced God in a most unique way. God tells him to pull off his shoes for he was standing on a holy ground. Moses on his own part shielded his face because he was scared to see the face of God (Exod 3:5-6). This was the prelude to his mission in leading the people

out of Egypt. The transformative moment was the encounter on Sinai and the giving of the covenant code (Exod 19-20). At this encounter, God instructs him to build a tent for him. The significance of this tent (shrine) is that it would be the dwelling place of God (cf. Exod 25:9; 26:1ff; 35:11ff; 36:13ff; 40:2ff; Num 1:50ff; 9:15ff; Jos 22:19; Pss 74:7 and 132:7). In this dwelling place of God, worship will be offered to God.

The covenant with God implied that their life would have to radically change, especially in the aspect of worship. The question that calls to mind is the place for this worship of God. The sanctuary, or the tent of meeting or even tamarisk tree? These places are inadequate to be used for the purposes of worship. The Temple became the immediate response to this new relationship between God and the people. It was like the symbolic Palace of the deity, like the tent, it was the residence of YHWH.⁴ This residence of YHWH would require the services of a Priest because it is Holy.

The structure and division of the temple authenticates the fact of Priests being specially designated to offer Sacrifices. As representative of the people, they continue to exemplify the relationship between God and the people. God adopts the people as his children (Exod 19:5). The adoption of Israel by God is well articulated by Prophet Hosea (Hos 11:1; Isa 1:2; Deut 32:6). He sees in this adoption great implications for them. Thus, it implies that the people of God/Israel have to relate to God in a special way. One basic way the human person relates to God is through prayer. Sacrifice to God is a form of prayer also.

Jewish sacrifice is always celebrated in and by the community. In the words of Mckenzie "Cult is a social worship through ritual performance. It is not private worship and it is not improvised."⁵ The leader is always the Priest since the institution of the nation and establishment of a place of worship requires a certain level of purity and cleanliness on the part of the leader. The holiness code

articulates this very clearly (Lev 17:1-27:34).

This paper titled “The Priest: Leading the Jewish community at worship” examines the role of the Priest in the community especially at the time of the building of the temple. The work is divided in four sections: Section one is an introduction to the work. The second section addresses the Priest leading the people at worship especially as the temple was established and dedicated for use. Worship has to take place in a specific location. This is in comparison to an older location like tent of meeting *’ōhel mō’ēd*. Indeed, the tent is a place of meeting; signifying the meeting of YHWH with Israel. It was at this place that YHWH found it convenient to reveal himself through oracular utterance.⁶ The Priests in the early beginnings were often consulting oracles for the people. In the third section, the focus will be on the different sacrifices. In treating this, the role of the Priest as leader at the offering is clearly indicated. The biblical texts are very specific in respect of what the Priest has to do. Finally, the paper will conclude with a look at the theology of sacrifice in the Jewish community.

2.0 *’ōhel mō’ēd* as a place to encounter God

As Israel made a covenantal pact with God in Exodus and in Deuteronomy, it would be important to note that they, like true nomads, had no fixed place for worship. The temple as it is understood is a fixed structure in which public worship takes place.⁷ At the time of the judges, temples were not built yet. Prior to that time Genesis presents God and humans living in the garden. This concept of garden in Eden (*gan-bā’ēden*) comes to us through the hands of the Yahwist tradition.⁸ What the tradition presents to us is the first explicit mention of a housing location where God and the human person met. In short, they were very precious in the sight of God and as a result, shared same abode as this tradition would make us understand. Unfortunately, as

they sinned against God, they were expelled from this abode (Gen 3:23). The fall of man led to his expulsion from the garden and thus, a new place to encounter God was imminent. This is particularly important for the continued communication of God with the patriarchs. The sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 gives us a great knowledge about the place of worship. Indeed, there is no place specifically built or set aside. Abraham simply followed instructions to bring Isaac to a place God has chosen for the sacrifice of his son. Nonetheless, he made an altar for this sacrifice in Gen 22:9. All through the narrative of the Patriarchs, there is a mention of altar and sanctuary as the normal venues/place to worship God. This continued until the time of the Exodus.

At the time of the Exodus, the people encountered God through the instrumentality of Moses. The tent of meeting was the medium of encounter (Exod 33:7). In Exodus 39:32 there is a mention of the people completing the construction of the abode of the tent of meeting. This command of God to Moses to construct a place of meeting indicates the importance of worship in the life of the Israelites as previously indicated. The story of man and God began with the story of creation.

The creation stories by the Priestly (codex) tradition⁹, represented by P and Yahwist tradition, represented by J, present God as the only creative principle/force.¹⁰ In the story, we find specific features whereby God and humanity are brought together within a given space. One of the accounts did not provide a specific space, while the other did. The Priestly account did not inform the reader about the exact venue God situated man, whom he made in his own image and likeness (Gen 1:26). In this verse, there was a divine consultation prior to the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of himself. This much the writer tells us. One can only imagine that humanity was placed in the universe. The J account states that God created man and placed him in a garden (Gen 2:8). For the first time, there is an

explicit mention of the garden in Eden *gan-bə'ēden*. God gave man abode at the garden. For the creation of woman according to J account, God made man fall into a deep sleep and took a rib of his to fashion woman (Gen 2:21-22).

All these activities happened in the garden. Hence, in this way there is an understanding of the abode inhabited by humanity and God. The relationship between God and these persons was one of reverence and fear as they continued to inhabit the garden of Eden.

It is important to note that the human person is destined to worship God as portrayed by the work of J. The P tradition has a similar thing. For this reason, the account climaxes in the creation of man with the provision of *Sabbath* as a day to rest and worship. In this way, humanity partners with God while fulfilling the law of Sabbath. Here, Sabbath does not only signal the end of God's creative activity but signals also cessation from work in order to give time to the worship of the One who began the entire process of work in the universe. It is in light of this that the Israelite community relates to God in a way of worship, communion and atonement.¹¹ This relationship that is spelt out in worship allows itself to be differentiated in segments such as: the ideas of gifts. Little wonder Exod 20:2 reads, "I am the Lord your God who brought you from the Land of Egypt, from the house of slavery/work."

God, by identifying himself as the God of the people who led them out of Egypt implies, they were obligated to worship him. Having been adopted Israel feels obliged to serve and worship God. Since worship is therefore a substantial part of their life, the Priesthood was instituted to see to this activity.¹² In the patriarchal time, worship was conducted by *Pater familias* (head/father of the house/family). God's presence always evokes adoration and worship. For the Israelites, this worship is usually led by a designated authority, which resides with the-*Pater Familias*

during the Patriarchal time and by Levitical Priest after the Sinai event.¹³ Worship has therefore been performed unbroken since the time of Abraham. Although the Priest was focused on offering sacrifices and worship, this does not in any way exhaust the Priestly office.¹⁴ It is crucial to note that worship creates an opportunity for the human person to encounter the divine. The Ark of the covenant represents the divine and thus makes him present wherever it is deposited. It should be noted that as the people got more settled and ceased to wander, they had a more permanent place to worship. The temple represents a progressive development in the economic life of the people.

2.2 The Ark of the Covenant taken into the Temple as the new place to encounter God:

There was an upward economic improvement after the death of king Saul. By the time David took over the governance of the people, he built on the already existing economic prosperity; and saw the need to make Jerusalem a central place for religious and civic purposes.¹⁵ To accomplish this, he decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem from Baalah in Judah (2 Sam 6:2). The journey from Baalah did not continue due to the death of Uzziah who was judged to be irreverent with the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6: 6-9). At this point, the Ark of the Covenant was deposited in the house of Obed Edom in the city of Gath (2 Sam 6: 9-11). As David heard about the blessing the ark of the covenant was bringing to Obed Edom he decided to get the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. It was brought into Jerusalem amidst dancing and celebration (2 Sam 6: 16-19). One important thing to note is that the Ark of the Covenant was housed in the tent of meeting. David found it not dignifying enough for God. Comparing his abode of Cedar with God's abode in a tent and the implication there of, he decided to build a temple for God, where the Ark of the Covenant could be housed (2 Sam 7: 1-7).

However, Nathan the Prophet told him that his Son after him would build the temple for him (2 Sam 7: 8-16). In this way, as Solomon became King, the project to build a temple for God was his primary goal. He had an elaborate preparation before the temple was built (1 Kgs 5: 1-18; 2 Chr 2: 1-18). Solomon was a very wise King. He got the materials for the temple ready before commencing its building. After all the preparations he built the temple in seven years (1 Kgs 6: 1-38). Solomon brought the best skilled men to build the interior of the temple especially the paraphernalia for worship (1 Kgs 7: 38). This was to make sure that the temple was a fitting place to house the Ark of the Covenant and to worship God. 1 Kgs 7: 40-45 gives a summary of the list of the temple furnishings. The temple was furnished with Gold, Silver, Bronze and other elements.¹⁶ After the temple had been completed, Solomon set out to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the temple (1 Kgs 8: 1-13; 2 Chr 5:2-6:2). The coming of the ark of the covenant into the temple makes it really an exceptional place. At this point, Solomon gathered all the people in the temple and addressed them, offered prayers, blessed the people and dedicated the temple (1 Kgs 8: 14-66). God in response to Solomon appeared to him as he did in Gibeon (1 Kgs 9:2). At this appearance, God assured Solomon that he heard his prayers and consecrated the temple as a place to offer worship forever (1 Kgs 9:3). The appearance of God and the confirmation of his acceptance of the temple dedicated to him marked the beginning of a centralized location for the worship of God. This invariably establishes logically the office of the Priesthood whose function would be to step into the Holy of Holies and all the other marked out and reserved areas in the new Temple. Now the Priesthood will become the focus of the nation since a temple has been built and dedicated for worship. Priests were to lead the people in the worship of God.

2.3 The Priest and the Temple

Numbers 3:1-4 trace the origin of Israelite Priesthood. Here Aaron is specifically named and his children identified by name. Two of the Sons, Nadab and Abihu died because they were unholy to the Lord in their priestly services. Cultic offerings would require the purity of the Priests in question. And this is why sacrifices were reserved to Priests alone. For this reason, the Priest must strive to be “cultically” clean. The Aaronic Priesthood started after the adoption at Sinai (Exod 20:2a). Their adoption as God’s own implied that they have to worship God in a rather exclusive manner, and with certain prohibitions. The prohibitions are presented in the imperfect tense, which has the nuance of the future with the tone of an imperative mood *lō’ ta’āseh-lākā pesel* (do not make for yourself a statue). This prohibition holds even for the future generation to come.

It is completely forbidden here to carve an image in the form of idol. This idea is muted by the use of *pesel, ā’* while the use of *tāmūnāh*. focuses attention more on pictures or images that are not carved. God does not want his people to make any representation for themselves. This prohibition is probably so to help them pay particular attention in the worship of the one God with whom they have entered into a special relationship. The Priest has the sacred function to moderate the action of the people in respect of this command. This Priesthood is hereditary. Numbers 25:11-13 presents God entering into a covenant with Phinehas son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron, the Priest. God communicated through Moses that he would establish Pinehas as Priest over the people. Assisting the Priests are the Levites. This is articulated in Numbers 3:5-8 (cf. Num 1:50). In this pericope, God instructed Moses to get the Levites to assist Aaron in the services of the tent of meeting and especially the tabernacle. Levites are given to taking care of the tabernacle (*hammīškān*) as this text indicates. These Levites are the sons of Jacob.¹⁸

It is important to note that there seems to exist some conflicts in the roles of the Levites and Priests as contained in Pentateuch. In Numbers 3:6 the Levites were to assist Aaron, while in Exodus 32:25-29 the Levites were chosen in opposition to Aaron because he supported idolatry at some point in time. In Deut 10:6-9, we read that they were chosen by Moses after Aaron's demise. The way to resolve this is to have a reliable genealogy of the Priestly lineage.¹⁹ Prophet Ezekiel seems to articulate quite clearly the various categories of Priests/Levites. In Ezk 44:6-14, the prophet delineates the roles of Levites. In doing so, he brings to clarity the fact of the different gradation of Levites: Levites who served in Sanctuaries, and Levites who served at the temple in Jerusalem. 2 Kgs 23:9 mentions Levites of lower ranks.

Centralization of worship and religion in Israel happened with the establishment of the monarchy. The worship of God will take place here forever. It is obviously clear that the temple is a central place for the worship of God. Hence, the Priests are expected to carry out their official duties in the temple. The temple is a reminder about the presence of God.²⁰ However, God's presence among the people is not as a result of any temple made by man.²¹ God does not really need the temple for his presence to be felt. Hence, the importance of the temple is only seen in the opportunity it provides the people to have a place of encounter with God through the availability of ritual celebrations. McKenzie notes that the major role of the Priest was to offer sacrifices, make rituals of purification and rituals of blessing.²² In this way he mediates between God and the people.

2.4 The mediatory role of the Priest

Solomon was glad to have succeeded in building a temple for God. The Priest is the one designated to provide service in such a Holy place. The temple is therefore the new '*ōhel mō'ēd* (tent of meeting). It is understandably so because they are no

longer a wandering people. The building of the temple and its consecration precisely brought to an end the significance of the tent of meeting, and the housing of the ark of covenant.²³ The temple represents the economic wellbeing of the people, who were once on a journey from Egypt to a promised land and lived in tents at those difficult moments. God equally followed them encountering them in the tent. In the temple, the Priests lead the people in prayer. He brings them to God by offering sacrifices for them and brings God's blessing to the people as he offers the Sacrifice. According to Brueggemann, "The sacrificial system is presented as a gift of God's grace that makes a relationship possible."²⁴ This relationship between God and the people is understood within this tradition as a mediated process. As a matter of fact, Israel does not have any immediate access to God. However, access to God is gained through authorized personnel and procedures.²⁵ No one can play this role other than the Priest at the temple as he has been designated by Moses. There seems to be an underlining implication for the construction of the temple. It has made worship assume a complex form. We shall be looking at the various forms of worship in a place dedicated for that singular objective.

3.0 SACRIFICES AS MAJOR MEANS OF JEWISH WORSHIP

The worship of God can be done in varied ways. For the Israelites, the primary way they worship God is by way of sacrificial offering. The book of Leviticus has copious references about regulations for worship and religious ceremonies in ancient Israel. The Priests were entrusted with the sole responsibility of presiding at the celebration of these sacrifices.

3.1 Holocaust offering (*'ōlāh qorbān*)

There are two kinds of Holocaust offering made here. One is

animal burnt offering, which comprises (*mīn-habbāqār*) cattle, herd or ox, and (*mīn-haṣṣō'n*) small cattle, sheep, and goats; and the other is a turtle dove (a bird holocaust offering) *mīn-hā'ôf 'ôlāh*. Animals to be offered are usually without blemish (Mall:6-14). Its name '*ôlāho* literally means 'that which goes up in flames'. It is taken from the verb *lālôt* which means "**to ascend, to go up**". It is often used in relation to going up to Jerusalem with special sense of going to the temple for Sacrifice. In all cases, the animals are totally consumed by fire on the altar (Lev 1:9). In this way, the pleasant fragrance coming from the victim that is burnt ascends to God. God is always pleased by the wonderful fragrance of the Offering. This offering previously would take place at the tent of meeting (*'ôhel mô'ēd*) before the building of the temple (cf. Exod 26; 29:42-46; 40:34-38 for tent of meeting). The procedures are contained in vv. 3-9 (a bull), 10-13 (a male sheep or goat and 14-17(turtle doves or pigeons). For the first two animals, the penitent brings the animal at the entrance of the tent of meeting, places his hands on the animal, and then it is slaughtered. But the high point is at the time the Priest takes the blood to sprinkle at the altar. It is indeed the sole job of the Priest. He does this because blood is dear to God (Lev 1:5). This is one job that the Priest cannot delegate. For the bird, there is a slight difference. The Priest does all the ceremonies. It is not taken to the entrance of the tent of meeting. Rather, he goes with it to the altar to perform the needed sacrifice. At the end of the ceremony, the Priest burns the whole victim (Lev 1:13,17). In fact, the total destruction of the victim for sacrifice indicates that the sacrifice is a more solemn offering than all other sacrifices.²⁶ This explains the reason for the elaborate elucidation of the ritual. By the nature of this sacrifice, it is sometimes called "the whole offering"(*'ôlāh kēlîl*).²⁷ There is a reference to the whole offering in Exod 20:24-26. This sacrifice is offered in celebration of an undertaking that YHWH has brought to a successful

conclusion.²⁸ It is counter Jewish culture to fail to give thanks to YHWH upon reception of a favour. There is also a sense of burnt offering reflected in grain offering.

3.2. Grain offering (= *qorbān mīnḥāh*)

The text of Lev 2: 1-16 provides information about the prescriptions for the grain or cereal offering. The word *mīnḥāh* ‘simply means “**gift, tribute (eliciting favour)**” (NRSV 144). It is interesting to note that this is equally a burnt offering as in the case of the *’ōlāh*. There are two types of grain offering: raw vv.1-3 and cooked vv.4-10.

The raw grain offering is presented with some oil and frankincense. Frankincense is an aromatic resin found in Arabia and East Africa.²⁹ Now the important thing is that the Priest takes a portion of the raw grain offering to the altar and burns it to God as a pleasing aromatic offering (Lev 2:2).

As the instruction goes only a part of the grain is offered in fire.³⁰ This part of the ceremony is what makes the offering acceptable and therefore very important. The same process for the cooked grain offering is attested to in Leviticus. The Priest removes from the cooked grain offering its token or memorial portion as it is called *’zkārātāh* (and offers this as a pleasing burnt offering to God.³² This burnt offering is supposed to bring the penitent to a gracious remembrance.³³ It is interesting to note that the law requires just a portion of the grain to be burnt. This felicitation that grain offering brings serves as the reason for a *shelamim* offering.

3.3 Shelamim Offering

The term “*Shelamim*” is not easily translated. However, it could be understood as: “gift, payment, communion, covenant, peace, whole and salvific.”³⁴ This offering is motivated by the positive condition of the penitent. *Shelamim* offering may be

divided into three groups: thanksgiving, votive and freewill.³⁵ As animal is involved in this offering, the Priest takes the blood and sprinkles around the altar. This is the sacrifice par excellence since it is far more important and more frequent than all the other sacrifices.³⁶ The sacrificial meal is a social act prompted by a joyous occasion.³⁷ The worshipper invites people to the meal (Exod 32:6; Deut 12: 18; Judg 9:27 and Zeph 1:7; and they were invited to eat and drink before Yahweh (Exod 34:15; 1 Sam 9:12ff; 16:3f; 2 Kgs 10:19).

The Priest is the only one who touches the blood of the victim because it is very holy. Again, as in the case of the grain offering, portion of the sacrificed animal is burnt.³⁸ The difference between *Shelamim* and *Olah* (Holocaust) is that it is the offering whose meat could be eaten by non-clergy/ non-Priests. This makes it a less holy offering since the laypersons partake of the meal.³⁹ This offering serves as communal feast between God and Israel. But they are instructed that the fat and blood belong to God. The people are to remove the fat and hand on to the Priest. The Priest puts this upon the altar for burning.

3.4 Sin Offering/ Purification Offering

The Hebrew word used for sin/purification offering is *ləḥaṭṭāṭ*... This word means “sin” and so the captioning of the offering as “sin” offering. Technically, since the offering is not for an individual, but for the purpose of avoidance of the desecration of the sanctuary, the title as purification offering may be very *ad rem*. This is an offering made for purification of unintentional sins.⁴⁰ There are other occasions that would necessitate the sacrifice of a sin offering. These are: consecration of the altar (Exod 29:15,26ff; 30:1ff; Lev 16:16); when the altar has in anyway been desecrated, invariably this will necessitate ritual cleansing⁴¹; or against pollution of a Nazirite (Num 6:10ff) or other defilements (Lev 12:6). In this way, the people avoid

and escape the wrath of God. This is the first time reference is made about the Priest possibly having sinned (Lev 4: 3).

If the anointed Priest has sinned, and then bringing guilt on the people, he shall bring for expiation a young and unblemished bull as a sin offering to God. He will perform the ceremony as stated. There are some specifics about the offering in verse 6. The Priest dips his fingers into the blood and sprinkles it in front of the curtain of the sanctuary. The blood that is sprinkled acts as a cleansing detergent. In this way, the tabernacle complex is cleansed from inadvertent transgressions (Num 15:22-31). Verse 7 gives further instruction on how to dispose of the remaining blood. The Priest then removes the necessary parts to be burnt on the altar to God. In the meantime, all the skin is taken away outside the camp to an ash heap and burnt. If the community has sinned, the elders shall place hands on the bull. The same prescription as above is followed by the Priest. The bull is also taken outside the camp. There is a little nuance with the sin offering of a ruler. Every other thing is observed except for the following:

- a. the Priest puts with his hands some of the blood in the horns of the altar of burnt offering and the rest poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering.
- b. and all the fat shall be turned into a smoke offering (nothing is said about how the skin is handled). This indeed is a significant difference from the sin offering of the Priest and that of the community.

The sin offering of an ordinary person calls for the use of a she (female) goat. Every other thing is done as in the case of the sin offering of a leader. Now, if a sheep is used, the penitent has to bring a female sheep without blemish. All other procedure is followed. In all this, the Priest plays an unsubstituted role. In fact, without the Priest, the offering will not take place. This offering completely shows that the human person stands in constant need

of the mercy of God. Not even the priest is spared. As a matter of fact, he equally offers sin offering sacrifice for himself. This is further explained in the Letter to the Hebrews. The new testament priesthood continues the tradition of the old priesthood.⁴²

3.5 Reparation/Repayment offering (Leviticus 5:14-26 BHS)

lā'āšām. is usually translated as “guilt offering”. It covers a gamut of things. The kind of sins that fall under this offering include sacrilege committed against sacred things, unidentifiable sin, and fraud arising from a false oath. There is no elaborate explanation as to how this was to be performed by the Priest. The important thing is that the Priest presides over it. The same priest will have to always use incense at offering. At this point we shall consider the offering of incense as sacrifice.

3.6 Offering of Incense

Almost all the offerings that involved burning would be accompanied by incense. Exod 30:34-38 gives a detailed instruction on how the incense is to be prepared. Indeed, it is most holy to God. Due to its Holy character, the High Priest alone can offer incense as a sacrifice. Consequently, he burns incense in the morning and evening (Exod 30:7-8.). This was initially burned on censers (Lev 10:1; 16:12; Num 16:17-18). Incense burning made atonement for sins by propitiating the divine wrath (Num 16:46-48). On the day of Atonement, the High Priest burns incense in order to appease God so that He might relent in his punishment to the people (Lev 16:12-13). God relents in his punishment because the smell of the incense always would be pleasing to Him. This is largely because the ancient Israelites believe that incense has miraculous power and can help them assuage God and get what they ask for. Consequently, the priest offers daily incense to God. Incense is a solid substance that produces fragrance when burnt.⁴³ It was made from aromatic gums and spices. Exodus 30:

34-35 gives details about its production. Most scholars think it got into use in Israel around 6th Century B.C.⁴⁴ Amongst the ancient near east people this was an essential element used in their temples. Incense was constantly burnt during worship in Canaanite religion and beyond (Jer 7: 9; 44: 17).⁴⁵ Apparently the use of incense seems to have assumed a sacred value. In this way, it became restricted for use by the priest and high priest, who lead the people in worship. At this point it may be expedient to look at the theology behind all this.

4.0 ITS THEOLOGY

The function of priest as leading the people at worship goes beyond the Old Testament. Even the New Testament attests quite strongly to this. He performs that action based on the ontological nature. The Letter to the Hebrews in a most succinct and clear manner corroborates it. Hebrews 5:1 state unequivocally: "Every high priest has been taken out of mankind and is appointed to act for men in their relations with God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins; and so he can sympathize with those who are ignorant or uncertain because he too lives in the limitation of weakness." This New Testament text synthesizes perspicuously the duties and obligations of priest. Primarily the priest is to offer sacrifices for himself and the people since the priest has connection with God and stands in for the people. Further, the Fathers of the council have this to say, "Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves."⁴⁶ He has to make atonement for his own sins and the sins of the people.

In Leviticus 4:3 we read about the sin offering offered by the high priest for his own sins. Since priests are humans, they are fraught with human weaknesses. The only way YHWH can be appeased after one has sinned, priest or the people, is to offer sacrifice as prescribed. Through this act of sacrifice, the

relationship between the sinner (this time the priest) and God is restored/made whole. Normalcy returns then to a relationship that sin had turned asunder. Without the priest, it would be hard for such a reconciliation to take place. One cannot evidently in the face of this deny the centrality of the priest, as a healer, mediator, reconciler and promoter of humankind. Worship of God has a psycho-somatic effect. The spirit influencing the body, and in some instances changes its course. Humanity employs the intellect in order to be able to abstract and formulate a clear pattern establishing the connection between God and humankind who is worshipped through the mediatory role of the priest. Central in all this becomes the position the priest occupies as leader of the worshipping community.

5.0 Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to establish the fact that the Priest is at the center of leading the people in the worship of God. The centrality of the place of Priest has been established by looking historically about how the Israelites have offered sacrifice in the temple.

Their days in Egypt and the subsequent freedom serve as the incontrovertible reason for their worship of God. They have to pay homage to the one who set them free from the land of slavery and moved them to a land of freedom. Indeed, if they were not set free they would never have been able to worship God in the manner in which they did. This facilitated the building of the temple. It was in this temple they encountered God and held worship at different times. Indeed, the Priest became the man who led this worship at different times of the year so that the people maintained a good relationship with God on the spiritual realm. If the Priesthood had not been established, the construction and dedication of the temple would have been a futile project. It is therefore important to underscore the fact that the Priest remains the custodian of Jewish communal worship at the time of the existence of the Temple.

Endnotes

¹Rainer Albertz, *Historia de la Religion de Israel en tiempos del Antiguo Testamento*, Vol. 1 De los comienzos hasta el final de la Monarquía (Tr. Dionisio Minguez), 1999, p.55.

²Rainer Albertz, *Historia de la Religion de Israel en tiempos del Antiguos Testamento*, p. 65.

³George Buchanan, “Sanctuary” in *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* (Paul J. Achtemeier ed.) Bangalore: Theological Publications, 2009, p.971.)

⁴John Mckenzie, *Theology of the Old Testament*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1974, p. 51.

⁵John Mckenzie, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 37.

⁶John McKenzie, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 48.

⁷Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991, p. 282.

⁸This is one of the four traditions that played an important role in the composition of the Pentateuch. Its name is derived from the use of YHWH in the text of the tradition. The tradition dates back to the 10th and 9th century B.C. Its materials are directed to the Southern part of the kingdom. For more detailed reading see J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Louisville, Kentucky: 1987, pp.114-117; Peter F. Ellis, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1962, pp.81-94.

⁹This is another tradition that contributed towards the composition of Pentateuch. It is a historiographical work with different subsidiary strata. Of all four traditions this seems to be the youngest. It dates back to the 6th Century B.C originating from the Southern kingdom (Jerusalem). It was this tradition that brought together all the existing traditions to form the Pentateuch. For further reading see J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Louisville, Kentucky: 1987, pp.150-161; Peter F. Ellis, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*.

¹⁰Norman Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch*. Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995, p. 44.

¹¹Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1. *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, p. 254; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament Vol. 1*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960, pp. 141-176; Harold Rowley, "The Meaning of Sacrifice in the Old Testament", *Bulletin of John Rylands Library*. 33 (1):74-110.p.76.

¹²Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, pp. 372, 374.

¹³Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament Vol. 1*, p.396.

¹⁴Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1. *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, p.244.

¹⁵Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, p. 312.

¹⁶Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, pp. 312-313.

¹⁷Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, p. 360.

¹⁸Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, p.360.

¹⁹Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, pp. 360-361.

²⁰Washington Jarvis, *Prophets, Priests and Kings: The Old Testament Story*. New York, NY: The Seabury, 1974, p.127.

²¹Washington Jarvis, *Prophets, Priests and Kings: The Old Testament Story*, p. 128.

²²John McKenzie, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 54.

²³Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament Vol. 1*, p. 397.

²⁴Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament. The Canon and Christian Imagination*. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2003, p. 68.

²⁵Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*.

The Canon and Christian Imagination, p.68; Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1. *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, p. 248.

²⁶John McKenzie, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 46.

²⁷Hermann Schultz, "The Significance of Sacrifice in the Old Testament." *American Journal of Theology* 4 (2): 257-313, p. 270; Norman Snaith, "Sacrifices in the Old Testament." *Vetus Testamentum* 7(3):308-317, p.310.

²⁸Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1. p. 255.

²⁹Cf. New Revised Standard Version, p. 144.

³⁰Hermann Schultz, "The Significance of Sacrifice in the Old Testament." p. 267; Norman Snaith, "Sacrifices in the Old Testament." Pp.314-315.

³¹Cf Lev 2:4-10

³²Cf Lev 2:9

³³Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1., p. 257

³⁴Cf. New Revised Standard Version, p.145.

³⁵Norman Snaith, "*Sacrifices in the Old Testament*", pp. 313-314.

³⁶Hermann Schultz, "*The Significance of Sacrifice in the Old Testament*", p.257.

³⁷William Harper, "Constructive Studies in the Priestly element in the Old Testament. VII. The Laws and Usages concerning Sacrifice considered comparatively". *The Biblical World* 18 (2): 120-10, p. 121.

³⁸Cf Lev 3:9-10, 14-15

³⁹Cf Lev 1:1-6:7; 7:19-21

⁴⁰John McKenzie, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p.47.

⁴¹Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 p.258; Norman Snaith, "Sacrifices in the Old Testament", pp. 310-311.

⁴²Cf Heb 5: 1-10

⁴³These are mixed together to produce some good fragrance. The important thing here is the fact that it is meant to be used for a religious ceremony. In other words, private use of incense

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was prohibited. See W.E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, “Incense” in Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, London: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985, p.322.

⁴⁴Joshua R. Porter, “Incense“, in Paul J. Achtemeier, Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2009, p. 453.

⁴⁵Roland Wallenfels, Gen. Ed., The Ancient Near East: An Encyclopedia for Students, Vol. I. New York, N.Y: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000, p. 186.

⁴⁶Cf. Austin Flannery, Sacrosanctum Concilium, nos. 48, Vat. Council II, Costello publishing company, (2007), 117-161.