

# THE USE OF THE TERM “PRIEST” IN THE PRAYER BOOK

Church Association Tract 232

IT is sometimes carelessly alleged that the essential meaning of the word “priest” is “one who offers sacrifice.” That, however, is contrary to fact. Any good dictionary taken at random will dissipate this fable. The idea of sacrifice was not involved in the etymology of the word, and the later association of “priest” with sacrifice sprang out of the accidental union in the same person of two separate offices.

It is matter for regret that the translators of the Old Testament used the word “priest,” to render the Hebrew “cohen.”

“The original meaning of the word ‘cohen,’ (says Canon R. B. Girdlestone in his excellent *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, page 383) is lost in obscurity. In 1 Kings iv.-5 the Authorised version renders it ‘principal officer’ (compare the marginal rendering of verse 2); in 2 Sam. viii.-18, and xx.-26 it has been rendered ‘chief ruler’ (margin, ‘princes’). David’s own sons were thus designated, but it seems impossible now to decide what duties were involved under this name. In Job xii.-19 it is rendered ‘princes.’ The French and other nations which have translated the word ‘Sacrificer,’ have made a mistake, because it is not the business of the priest to sacrifice. The *people* are the sacrificers, *i.e.* slayers of the victim; whilst the priests, according to the Levitical system, sprinkled the blood of atonement on the altar, and turned the pieces into fragrant smoke; and this they did as the representatives of the mercy of God. It need hardly be said that no process answering to this peculiar rite is exercised by the Christian ministry.”

Dean Plumptre remarks, in Smith’s *Dictionary of the Bible* (II.-925), that “the history of language presents few stranger facts than those connected with these words. Priest, our only equivalent for *Hiereus*, comes to us from the word which was chosen because it excluded the idea of a sacerdotal character. *Bishop* has narrowly escaped a like perversion, occurring, as it constantly does, in Wycliffe’s version as the translation of *Archiereus* (e.g., John xviii-15, Heb. viii.-1.)” Wycliffe used “priest” correctly in such passages as Acts xiv.-23, I Tim. v.-17: not so much translating, as transferring the original word.

The best excuse that can be offered for the translators of the Bible is that there was no single English word which would exactly hit off the peculiar function of a sacrificing priest. The people “offered” and “presented” their offerings, so that there was no word left to discriminate exclusively the peculiar function of the professional ministrant. To have repeated the two words “sacrificing priest” every time that “cohen” recurred might have proved wearisome and awkward; but the unfortunate result has been to create a confusion in the minds of the Bible-reading Protestants between the Levitical priest and the Christian presbyter. Let the blame, however, be thrown on the right shoulders: for the compilers of the Liturgy used the word “priest” in its strict sense as the abbreviated form of “presbyter”; whereas the translators of the Old Testament applied it in a restricted meaning which was not proper to the word itself.

We propose to illustrate this by a few extracts from the writings of the leading translators of the English Bible, and the chief Apologists for the English Prayer Book when both had just been recently issued.

TYNDALE rightly claims the foremost place, and he candidly admits that priest was not the rightful translation of the Hebrew word *cohen*. He says:—

“There is a word in Latin SACERDOS, in Greek HIEREUS, in Hebrew COHAN, that is minister, an officer, a sacrificer, or priest; as Aaron was a priest, and sacrificed for the people, and was a mediator between God and them. *And in the English should it have had some other name than priest.* But Antichrist hath deceived us with unknown and strange terms, to bring us into confusion and superstitious blindness. Of that manner is Christ a priest for ever, and all we priests through him, and need no more of any such priest on earth, to be a mean for us unto God. For Christ hath brought us into the inner temple, within the veil or forehanging, and unto the mercy-stool of God, and hath coupled us unto God; where we offer, every man for himself, the desires and petitions of his heart, and sacrifice and kill the lusts and appetites of his flesh, with prayer, fasting, and all manner godly living. Another word is there in Greek, called *presbyter*, in Latin *senior*, in English an *Elder*, and is nothing but an officer to teach, and not to be a mediator between God and us.” (*Doctrinal Treatises*, page 255.)

FULKE, in his *Defence of the English Translations of the Bible* (page 109, cf. pp. 242, 243), replied to his Romish adversary:—“You corruptly translate *sacerdos* and *presbyter* always as though they were all one, *a priest*, as though the Holy Ghost had made that distinction in vain, or that there were no difference between the priesthood of the New Testament and the Old. The name of the priest, according to the original derivation from *presbyter*, we do not refuse; but according to the common acception for a sacrificer, we cannot take it, when it is spoken of the ministry of the New Testament. And although many of the ancient Fathers have abusively confounded the terms of *sacerdos* and *presbyter*, yet that is no warrant for us to translate the Scripture, and to confound that which we see manifestly the Spirit of God hath distinguished . . . Neither is *presbyter* by ecclesiastical use so appropriated to signify a priest, that you would always translate it so in the Old Testament, where your Vulgar translator useth it for a name of office and government, and not for priests at any time.”

Indeed this was freely admitted by the other side. It is not generally known that HARDING the Jesuit published a partial reply to Jewel’s celebrated “Apology” at Louvain, in 1567, *cum privilegio*. There is a copy of this rare work in the British Museum bearing the lengthy title—*A rejoinder to M. Jewel’s replie against the sacrifice of the Mass. In which the doctrine of the Answers to the xvii Article of the Challenge is defended, and further proved, and all that this reply containeth against the sacrifice is clearly confuted and disproved by Thomas Harding, Doctor of divinitie*. On page 13 of this work Harding says:—“I am constrained by the Replie to make a distinction between these two terms *sacerdos* and *presbyter* by which the persons of the highest order in the Church be called, and in our English tongue there want two distinct terms correspondent with them, the name of priest serving to both, as common use hath received; I will for a few leaves, that my talk may be more distinct and better perceived, use the term sacrificer for the Latin *sacerdos*, and the term priest for the word *presbyter*.”

Archbishop WHITGIFT in defending the Prayer Book against Cartwright, said:—

“The name of priest need not be so odious unto you as you would seem to make it. I suppose it cometh of this word *presbyter*, not of *sacerdos*; and then the matter is not great . . . The learned and best of our English writers, such I mean as write in these our days, translate this word *presbyter* so: and the very word itself, as it is used in our English tongue, soundeth the word *presbyter*. As heretofore use hath made it to be taken for a sacrificer, so will use now alter that signification, and make it to be taken for a minister of the Gospel. But it is mere vanity to contend for the name when we agree of the thing: the name may be used, and not used, without any great offence.” (*Works*, III.-350-1. Compare II.-311.)

HOOKER supported the same contention by urging—

“As for the people when they hear the name it draweth no more their minds to any cogitation of sacrifice, that the name of a Senator or Alderman causeth them to think upon old age or to imagine that everyone so termed must needs be ancient because years were respected in the first nomination of both. Wherefore to pass by the name, let them use what dialect they will, whether we call it a Priesthood, a Presbytership, or a Ministry it skilleth not; although in truth the word *presbyter* doth seem

more fit, and in propriety of speech more agreeable than priest with the drift of the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ . . . The Holy Ghost throughout the body of the New Testament making so much mention of them doth not anywhere call them priests. The prophet Esay, I grant, doth; but in such sort as the ancient Fathers, by way of analogy." (*Eccl. Polity*, ed. Keble, II.-471.)

BULLINGER, in his "Decades," sanctioned by convocation, explains this "analogy."

"It appeareth that the ministers of the New Testament, for a certain likeness which they have with ministers of the Old Testament, of ecclesiastical writers are called priests; for as they did the service in the tabernacle, so these also, after their manner and fashion, minister to the Church of God. For otherwise the Latin word (*sacerdos*) is derived of holy things, and signifieth a minister of holy things; a man, I say, dedicated and consecrated unto God to do holy things. And holy things are not only sacrifices, but what things soever come under the name of religion; from which we do not exclude the laws themselves and holy doctrine. In the Old Testament we read that David's sons were called priests, not that they were ministers of holy things (for it was not lawful for them, which came of the tribe of Judah, to serve the tabernacle, but only to the Levites); but because they, living under the government and discipline of priests, did learn good sciences and holy divinity." (*Fifth Decad.*, Sermon III.)

Even Mr. SCUDAMORE, the learned Ritualist, admits that—

"It is evident, both from its derivation and history, that the name of priest was not originally associated with the idea of sacrifice. In strictness it is not applicable to the sacrificing officers of the Jewish or heathen temples; but our language was destitute of a word properly descriptive of their function, and we naturally extended to them the name of office assigned to those who discharge an analogous duty in the Church of Christ. We called them presbyters or priests, and thenceforth, attaching the idea of sacrifice to the word, lost sight of its original Christian meaning." (*Notitia Eucharistica*, page 186.)

Nevertheless we must always bear in mind, to quote the words of Dr. Blakeney, that "the word priest denotes simply a presbyter, and it is necessary to prefix the word *sacrificing* to it in the designation of one who bears the office in a Romish sense. Our Church does this, when she speaks in the Homily of a "sacrificing priest." Let us be careful to do likewise.

At the last revision of the Prayer Book, the clergy subscribed in four separate bodies, representing the two houses of both the Convocations. Each of these described the Ordinal now in use as "the form and manner of ordaining and consecrating bishops, *presbyters*, and deacons." The book thus subscribed is now part of the Act of Uniformity, and thus furnishes the most authoritative declaration possible of the meaning of the Church of England.