

Priests and Levites: background for Luke 10.25-37

In the Hebrew Bible, there are several traditions purporting to provide lineages and rules for who is a “priest” or a “Levite.” It can be very confusing, as translations also use terms like “levitical priests” (e.g., Deut 17.9; 18.1). The lineage issue involved the question of one of three ancestors:

1. **Aaron: e.g., Exodus 28.1:** Then bring near to you your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests--Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. (also, Ex 30.30, etc.)
2. **Levi: e.g., Deut 18.1:** The levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no allotment or inheritance within Israel. They may eat the sacrifices that are the Lord's portion (also, Deut 21.5; 31.9, etc.)
3. **Zadok: e.g., 1 Kings 4.2:** and these were his high officials: Azariah son of Zadok was the priest (also, 2 Chronicles 31.10)

But note such hybrid cases as these:

Ezekiel 40.46: “the priests who have charge of the altar; these are the descendants of Zadok, who alone among the descendants of Levi may come near to the LORD to minister to him.”

Exodus 38.21: the work of the Levites being under the direction of Ithamar son of the priest Aaron. (also, Numbers 3.6; Nehemiah 10.38)

One other tradition, only once in the Hebrew Bible and in Hebrews in the New Testament: the “order of Melchizedek”:

Psalms 110.3: YHWH has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Priests in Luke/Acts

Luke	
1.5	In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah , who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah . His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.
3.2	...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas ...
5.14	And he ordered him to tell no one. "Go," he said, "and show yourself to the priest , and, as Moses commanded..."
6.4	"He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat , and gave some to his companions?"
9.22	"The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes , and be killed, and on the third day be raised."
17.14	When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests. "
19.47	The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him...
20.1	One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders (also, 22.2, 66; 23.10)
Acts	
4.1	While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple , and the Sadducees came to them
4.6	Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.
Note: all other uses of “priest” in Acts refer to “high priest”	