

# Temple Officials

When we consider the people who ran the Temple, we must also be aware of its vast size to fully comprehend just what a great undertaking it was, and the great organisational skills that were necessary. We must also be aware of the degree of officialdom needed. The Temple was operated nevertheless very efficiently, the Priests carried out the privileged duties, while the Levites, as the Temple Guard, kept law and order, making sure that the Temple rules were observed. We will now take a look at some of these officials, one group at a time.

**PRIESTS** - These were the most important people in the Temple. The priesthood was made up of differing ranks, orders and tribes, with different priests fulfilling their duties at differing times. The High Priest had the responsibility and final decision on everything, and was effectively the most important man in Israel. Even the king was subject to the rule of the High Priest. However, in the Herodian period it was somewhat different, as the High Priest was under the power of Roman authority. The High Priest filled all the leading official functions as well as presiding over all major operations. Other officials took other positions under him, as well as taking on the subsidiary matters.

**LEVITES** - These also had very important tasks. They were not only responsible for strictly enforcing Temple laws and regulations but they formed the Temple Guard. Those who were caught in breach of Temple regulations were very severely dealt with, as the Temple Guards showed no mercy.

The Levites, like the Priests, held highly favoured hereditary positions, although they were on a lower level. Many of the Levites who were Guards, were also Priests, as some parts of the Temple were considered off-bounds to Levitical Priests, but accessible to Levitical Guards. The Levites were also responsible for the instruments in the Temple, as well as the singing, as a key part of the worship.

They played a number of musical instruments and sang. They led the singing and worship from the semi-circular platform at the head of the 15 steps of Ascent. They began their work at an early age, and the harmonising of the younger and older men's voices was renowned all over the Ancient World.

The Levites were not allowed to exercise the same authority as Priests, as the sacrificial market in the outer courts of the Temple was under the control of the priesthood. In the days of Jesus, the High Priest was called ANNAS, and he was an extremely wealthy man.

To perform his duties, a priest had to reach a certain standard of education, he must also be married; as this also qualified him for membership of the Sanhedrin (council).

**SADDUCEES** - The Sadducees were yet another group who were born to their hereditary positions within the Temple, for although the Temple was a religious building, it was also the centre of all Jewish life, and nearly all major decisions were made there.

This obviously included the control and organisation of everyone in the land, as well as the religious establishment. This, as one can imagine, brought with it a sizeable economy, and with its vast sums of money. This provided the leading people with comfortable positions, and that especially meant the High Priest, and of course the Sadducees. The Sadducees held no objection to being under Roman rule, as this enabled them to keep their comfortable lifestyle.

It is also true that not all those who qualified for the priesthood by birth were accepted. Some would have been afflicted by physical ailments that prevented them serving. It was also true that corruption played a part, and so some would have bought their way in. This would have placed him in a position, once he had become a priest, to use his power to make large sums of money for himself.

**PHARISEES** - Another group of officials which were seen regularly within the Temple courts are the Pharisees. They are immediately recognised by their distinctive dress, especially the phylacteries, although they dressed modestly compared to the finely dressed Sadducees.

They gained their positions through deep study and devotion to fulfil the law as they understood it. They were largely responsible for writing the Mishnah as well as the Gemara. The Pharisees thought more about the laws of God and fulfilling the Covenant pragmatically, often in the finest detail. They were often found fulfilling the letter of the law in public places. This often brought a mixed response, some people loved them, some hated them.

**ESSENES** - This group were rarely seen within the Temple courts, but lived in the desert near Qumran, in solitude. However they were more concerned with keeping the spirit of the law than the

letter, and seldom even came to Jerusalem. Their community practised their own style of worship, which kept the Covenant of God, mainly by prayers and devotional worship, as they did not go too heavily into the sacrificial system. It therefore remains that they played a very small part in Temple worship.

**SCRIBES** - There is generally known to be two types of scribe; those who worked in the Temple on a continual basis copying the scriptures, and those who provided a letter-writing service for the public in the Temple. The former worked in what is known as the Chamber of the Stone, or Chamber of the Honourable Councillors, and were involved in everything needed to carry out Temple worship. The latter were known to carry a pen and quill as well as other writing equipment, enabling them to carry out a writing service for a fee. They would be able to provide the necessary Temple documents such as a Bill of Divorcement, or a Ketubah, which is a marriage document.

**ELDERS** - These were, as their name suggests, the older citizens, the sages and wise men with all their accumulated wisdom of years, learning and sayings. They usually sat at the Temple Gate, and could belong to any of the previous categories, except the Essenes.

**LAWYERS** - A lawyer in the Temple was nothing like the lawyer we know in our society today. Israel was a theocracy, and this means that the nation looked to the Temple, and therefore to God, to provide everything they need. These lawyers interpreted the law of Moses, something of which many ordinary people did not understand. Although they had a sophisticated legal system, there were no appeals. If someone was found guilty of something, he was dealt with swiftly and severely. They were also there to answer any legal problems the people may have had. It would then be dealt with by one of these learned men, who may be a Scribe, a Pharisee or one of the Elders.

**RABBIS** - Of all the people seen in the Temple, the Rabbi was the most prominent. A Rabbi was a travelling preacher. However, he may also be a Scribe or Pharisee. There were two schools among the Rabbis, one was the School of Hillel, the other was the School of Shammai. These schools were named after famous Rabbis who founded them, as well as their theology. There were over 300 points of disagreement between the schools. One interpreted the oral law while the other interpreted the written law. The oral law is the sayings passed down orally by the Elders. Young Rabbis, after having been brought up in one of either of the schools, went to sit at the feet of one of the leading scholars in the Temple (as Paul did under Gamaliel). There they learned to interpret the law correctly and to preach. Rabbis that had learned the law orally, taught in both the street as well as the Temple. However, a Rabbi had to be of a very high standard of competence before he could teach in Solomon's Porch or the Treasury. For this he had to sit among the senior Rabbis. However, many of them improved their qualifications as well as their authority, as they gained a larger following.

These were the main groups who organised and ran the Temple. The priests controlled the main jobs. For instance, he would look after the gates, while another would look after the Treasury, and another would supervise the services. There were the members of the public who made up the worshippers, street traders and shop-keepers who provided for the needs of the many visitors who had made long journeys to attend the Temple feasts and Sabbaths. There were porters who offered their services to carry whatever anyone needed moving.

**PUBLICANS & TAX GATHERERS** - We may often read of the tributes that had to be paid in the Temple. These were collected by the priests in the appropriate places. However the Tax Gatherers collected tax from all the people, under the authority of Rome. Naturally the people hated this, as they were then working for their enemies. There were two kinds of tax gatherers, the main ones were called tax collectors (Luke 19), the lesser ones were known as 'Publicans' and were known for their devious ways. They were not allowed to enter the Temple or even a synagogue to take part in public worship or prayers. They were branded as thieves and pickpockets, therefore they collected their taxes in the outer courts of the Temple. It was possible for a publican to purchase his office from the Romans.

**MONEY-CHANGERS & MONEY LENDERS** - These people plied their trade in the 'Royal Porch' which was used for general business and commerce. This was the most convenient place as this was where everyone met. These were not the ones of whom Jesus threw over the tables, as they were there legitimately changing money for Temple Tax. There were others who were self-appointed who did this, and deliberately swindled the people.

There were of course, numerous Roman soldiers positioned around the outer courts. They were not allowed in the inner courts. The Temple was the gathering place for people from all over Israel and the rest of the known world, and here the fabric of Judaism was put together.