

## THE PRIEST AS THE REDEEMED MAN: A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PRIESTHOOD

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Evangelicals have increasingly realized the value of Biblical-theological method in understanding God's redemptive plan in the person and work of Christ. Yet it is an irony of modern evangelical scholarship that while much has been written on the kingly and prophetic roles of Christ from a redemptive-historical point of view, so important a topic as Christ's priesthood has to date received very little treatment of a similar kind, notwithstanding the formidable literature the subject has elicited over the centuries in the sphere of systematics.

Overlooked though it has been, there is in fact in the Scriptures a foundational and pervasive theme underlying the idea of priesthood that lends itself easily to redemptive-historical treatments—namely, the priest as the redeemed (ideal) man.<sup>1</sup> The present paper consists of exegetical studies of a Biblical-theological kind to suggest how this theme works itself out in Scripture, whether in historical narration, symbolic representation in cultus, didactic exposition, or eschatological expectation. While restrictions on length necessitate a selective rather than a comprehensive treatment, it is nevertheless hoped that this study may serve as a humble beginning to more fruitful research into this fascinating area.

### I. PRIESTHOOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

When one thinks of priesthood in the OT one usually associates with it the sacrificial, ritualistic, mediatorial and intercessory duties of the priest. The bulk of prescriptions relating to these duties in the Scriptures is overwhelming. Along with these one may also mention the teaching of the law (Lev 10:10-11; Deut 33:10; 2 Chr 5:3; Mal 2:6-9), the administration of justice (Deut 17:8-13; Ezek 44:24) and the discovering of the divine will (e.g. Num 27:21; 1 Sam 14:41; 28:6; etc.). That the OT priesthood includes all these functions is beyond question. It would be a mistake, however, to understand the significance of the priesthood solely in terms of these activities and fail to give attention to its nature. In the following pages we will endeavor to demonstrate that the priest-

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<sup>1</sup>This theme can be seen as a corollary of M. G. Kline's idea that re-creation in the image of God is an act of priestly investiture. Cf. Kline, "Investiture with the Image of God," *WTJ* 40 (1977) 39-62 (= "A Priestly Model of the Image of God" in *Images of the Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980]). Kline's arguments, however, are somewhat convoluted and are not infrequently based on analogical reasonings that are at times quite intriguing. The presentation I am offering here is more or less independent of his, a simple linear approach being taken.

hood has its primary significance in typifying the redeemed/restored people of God, the eschatological and ideal Israel that finds its supreme expression in Jesus Christ. In fact, the priestly duties only have meaning in connection with this idea.

Though priests existed in pre-Mosaic times in Israel<sup>2</sup> and there were "laymen" such as Noah, Abraham and Job who as family heads assumed priestly functions (Gen 8:20; 22:13; Job 1:5), it is only with the formally and divinely instituted Aaronic priesthood that we are concerned.

Exod 19:5-6 is a key passage: Before the institution of the Aaronic priesthood, Israel was designated a *mamleket kôhânîm*, "kingdom of priests." What does the phrase mean?

This problematic expression has elicited considerable debate and an extensive literature over the years as to its meaning and significance. It is not my purpose to survey all the suggestions that have been put forward. Suffice it to state that the phrase is mostly understood in terms of an exalted spiritual task,<sup>3</sup> a mediatorial service that declares the will of God to mankind and bears human needs before him.<sup>4</sup> Israel is selected as a special people so that in an inverse way the nations might be blessed.<sup>5</sup>

While there is much truth in such a view, its fundamental weakness is that undue emphasis is given to Israel's function to the exclusion of her worth, which is conferred in election. The setting of Exodus 19 was that God had redeemed Israel from the bondage of Egypt and was going to enter into a covenant relationship with her as a people. The purpose of the redemption, then, was that God might regain a people as his own treasured possession. The election motif was very clear: Out of a fallen creation, God was going to restore his purpose through a special people whom he had chosen from among the nations, to the end that he might be their God and they might be his people. Whether "kingdom of priests" is synonymous with "holy nation" is a moot question.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that both these terms serve as further elaboration of the meaning of God's "treasured possession"—that is, the election entails the priesthood and holiness of Israel. This being the case, the priesthood of Israel then signified primarily

<sup>2</sup>The priests in Exod 19:22, 24 are probably Midianite priests who joined Israel (cf. Jethro, 2:16; 3:1; 18:1). Melchizedek was also an important figure outside the Aaronic order.

<sup>3</sup>E.g. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967).

<sup>4</sup>E.g. J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (London: Oliphants, 1971); B. S. Childs, *Exodus* (London: SCM, 1974).

<sup>5</sup>W. J. Dumbrell, "New Israel," in *The End of the Beginning* (Sydney: Moore Theological College annual lecture, 1983; publication forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup>Contrary to the popular opinion that the phrases were synonymous, W. L. Moran ("A Kingdom of Priests" in *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought* [ed. J. L. McKenzie; New York: Herder and Herder, 1962] 7-20) argues that they were separate entities, while C. A. Briggs (*Messianic Prophecy* [Scribner's, 1889] 102) suggests that the term *mamleket kôhânîm* was more a compound noun than that it was a construct relation of the genitive case (hence not synonymous to *gôy qādôš*)—i.e., Israel was to be at once priest-kings and royal priests. J. H. Elliot (*The Elect and the Holy* [Leiden: Brill, 1966] 53-54), arguing that in the context of the passage it was the kingship of Yahweh rather than that of Israel that was proclaimed, maintains the parallelism between the two phrases. W. J. Dumbrell (*Creation and Covenant* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1984] 87-88) also prefers the same view.

the idea of a redeemed people/creation rather than her mediatorial or sacrificial duties. The missionary/mediatorial consequences only resulted from her ontological worth. In the state of separated holiness Israel demonstrated to the world around her the reality of divine new creation.<sup>7</sup>

Given that only the sons of Aaron could serve as priests, however, in what sense was Israel a "kingdom of priests"?<sup>8</sup> The answer is to be sought in the identification of all Israel with the high priest. Exodus 28, an important passage, conveys some very significant ideas in the description of the priestly garments. Most important of all is that the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were carried by the priest (vv 9–12, 21): Even though not every single Israelite served as priest, Israel was marked off as a holy nation by this identification. The inscription "Holy to the Lord" (v 36) pointed to the holy status of Israel as the redeemed people of God. In Psalm 133 there is perhaps also the idea that the unity of Israel was symbolized by the anointing oil on Aaron's head. In Lev 4:3 we read: "If the anointed priest sins so as to bring guilt on the people. . . ."<sup>9</sup> One can hardly fail to notice the similarity to the imputation of Adam's sin on mankind (cf. Rom 5:12–14). It was only natural that the treatment of the sin of the high priest was identical to that of all Israel (cf. Lev 4:1–21). In eating the sin offering the high priest also bore away the guilt of the whole congregation (and presumably nullified the guilt by his holiness; cf. 10:17).<sup>10</sup> Zech 3:4, 9 presents us with the picture that taking away the sin of the high priest resulted in the removal of that of the whole nation. The death of the high priest was a national event that marked off a theocratic era, for the manslayers were then free to leave the cities of refuge (Num 35:25, 28, 32; Josh 20:6). It is in this representation/identification role of the priest that we readily understand his mediatorial and intercessory duties.

With the understanding of the priest as the redeemed man, passages hitherto somewhat enigmatic make much more sense. For instance the priest, who represented the restored creation, must be free from all imperfections. "He must be perfect as a man, if he is to be a priest."<sup>11</sup> Imperfections such as wid-

<sup>7</sup>Though stressing Israel's function rather than her worth, Dumbrell (*Creation* 88) maintains that Israel's role in the OT was not mediatorial, if by mediatorial it is meant that Israel was offering positively to the nations the blessings of her covenant relationship with God. He comes to the similar conclusion that the notion of v 6 is basically passive rather than missionary (p. 90).

<sup>8</sup>Citing Exod 19:16–25; 20:18–21, W. C. Kaiser concludes: "Unfortunately for the people, they declined the privilege of being a national priesthood in preference to representation under Moses and Aaron. Therefore the original purpose of God was delayed . . . until New Testament times when the priesthood of all believers was again proclaimed" (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978] 109). This view is difficult to sustain in that what the people requested in 20:18 ff. was a prophetic rather than a priestly mediator, not to mention the fact that God approved their choice—"they have spoken well" (Deut 18:15–17).

<sup>9</sup>LXX reads "so as to make the people sin. . . ."

<sup>10</sup>Aaron's disobedience to Moses' command to eat the offerings after his two sons' death may then be explained in terms of his assuming to himself a part in his sons' sinfulness, and thus his not being in a position to bear the people's guilt.

<sup>11</sup>M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; quoted in G. J. Wenham, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 24.

owhood, uncleanness of all sorts, physical deformity and death were all results of the fall. They were not part of the original creation, and hence they must not be associated with the priest (Leviticus 21). A logical extension of this idea is to see the priest as the restorer of creation as well as the restored creation. Therefore healing and cleansing naturally became priestly functions. In eschatological expectation the messianic priest (Mal 3:1–4) would be a healing figure (4:2). Israel's privileged position among all the nations would be restored through healing and cleansing (Jer 33:6–9; compare esp. v 9a with Exod 19:5–6).

The purpose of the sacrificial duties was not simply for the putting away of sin. This was but a means to the ultimate end of regaining the priesthood, which entailed access to God's sanctuary (which access was free for Adam, the primal man-priest,<sup>12</sup> before the fall) and hence the restoration of fellowship with God. Num 18:1 strikingly ties the priesthood and the sanctuary together. Kline even sees in the layers of the priestly garment a replica of the three divisions of the tabernacle (which in turn replicate the threefold structure of the cosmos).<sup>13</sup> There may be danger of an unrestrained resort to symbolic interpretation. However, the similarity that he lists between some of the functions of the garment and the tabernacle is not to be ignored.

The prophet Zechariah employed access imagery to describe the work of the coming Branch of whom the high priest Joshua was a sign (Zech 3:3–9). The reinstatement of Joshua's high priesthood after removal of his iniquity resulted in free access to the Lord's sanctuary (v 7).

The glory and righteousness motifs find their expression in the priestly garment. In Exod 28:2, 40 the holy garment was said to be made "for glory (*kābôd*) and for beauty (*tip'eret*)." This was most likely an echo of God's original purpose to crown (*ātar*) man "with glory (*kābôd*) and majesty (*hādār*<sup>14</sup>)" (Ps 8:5; see also the discussion below on Hebrews 2). Isa 62:2–3, which describes redeemed Israel in priestly language,<sup>15</sup> speaks of Israel's displaying her glory (*kābôd*) before all the nations; she will also be "a crown (*āṭārā*) of beauty (*tip'eret*)" and a "royal turban"<sup>16</sup> in the hand of God. The linen garment was associated with the righteousness of the priest, without which he could not approach God (Exod 28:40–43; cf. Lev 16:4; Isa 64:6; Zech 3:4). The idea of approaching God while wearing clothing went back to the time of the fall. God

<sup>12</sup>In certain Jewish speculations about Adam, the eschatological priest-king assumes the characteristics of Adam conceived as the ideal man; cf. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1959) 85. Cf. also our discussion of the connection between Exod 28:2, 40 and Ps 8:5.

<sup>13</sup>Kline, *Images* 43–44.

<sup>14</sup>*Hādār* has the range of meanings of "ornament, splendor, majesty, beauty, dignity, honor," while *tip'eret* means "beauty, ornament, glory, distinction, pride" (according to KB). It can be readily seen that the two ranges of meanings listed largely coincide. In fact the LXX translated both *tip'eret* in Exod 28:2, 40 and *hādār* in Ps 8:5 by the same word *timē*.

<sup>15</sup>Kline, *Images* 50.

<sup>16</sup>Incidentally, this phrase also hints at the merging together of the priestly and kingly offices in the last days.

clothed Adam and Eve with garments so that their fear of judgment in his presence might subside, through the covering of their "nakedness" (Gen 3:10, 21). In the same vein God commanded Israel:<sup>17</sup> "You shall not go up by steps to my altar, lest your nakedness be exposed on it" (Exod 20:26). Thus in Ps 132:9 we read: "Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness" (cf. also v 16; 2 Chr 6:41). Isaiah employs this metaphor of putting on the priestly vestments as a symbol of redemption: The eschatological Israel, "who carries the vessels of the Lord" in the new exodus (Isa 52:11), will clothe herself with "beautiful (*tip'eret*) garments" (52:2). This investiture picture is again seen in Isa 61:10, where a combination of priestly and bridal language is used to describe the Messiah, the ideal Israel.<sup>18</sup>

In some of the passages considered above we observed a striking connection between kingship and priesthood in Israel. It is not our purpose to discuss this issue here. Suffice it to mention that these two offices had been kept separate throughout the OT, merging together only in the person of Christ (cf. Ezek 21:26–27; Zech 6:12–14; Heb 7:1–3). It is to the priestly nature and function of Christ, which were already prophesied in the OT (e.g. Zech 3:8–9; Dan 9:24–27; Ps 110:4; Isaiah 61; Mal 3:1–4), that we now turn.

## II. JESUS AS THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MAN-PRIEST

Admittedly, in the NT only the book of Hebrews offers a full-fledged priestly Christology. It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the many priestly Christological statements and ideas of other NT passages. For one thing, as Cullmann points out, the concept of high priest is closely connected to that of the suffering '*ebed Yahweh*'<sup>19</sup> (so far as the atonement aspect is concerned). The realization of this connection immediately broadens the Scriptural basis of our thinking on this subject. Moreover, though no NT writer other than the author of Hebrews explicitly mentions Jesus as a priest, imageries similar to that of Hebrews are employed in such a way that the priestly functions of Jesus—such as intercession (John 17:19; Rom 8:34) and opening the way of access (Rom 5:2; Eph 2:18; 1 Pet 3:18)—are apparent. In fact, as we shall see shortly there is a discernible effort in the gospels (especially in Luke) to portray Jesus as the ideal priest in a manner akin to their portrayal of him as the true king and prophet.

Jesus' baptism in Luke 3:21–22 was in all likelihood the inauguration ceremony of his priesthood (possibly also with a view to his atoning death as the purification for his people<sup>20</sup>). This alone would account for the explicit mention of his age at his baptism as about thirty years in the next verse (3:23; cf. Num

<sup>17</sup>Or Moses; the command is in the singular.

<sup>18</sup>Note that *kāhan* always means "to act as priest" elsewhere in the OT (cf. Exod 28:1, 3, 4, 41; 29:1, 44; 30:30; 40:13, 15; Lev 7:35; 16:32; Num 3:3, 4; Deut 10:16; 1 Chr 6:10; 24:2; 2 Chr 11:14; Ezek 44:13; Hos 4:6).

<sup>19</sup>Cullmann, *Christology* 83.

<sup>20</sup>O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1950).

4:3, 30, 35, 43, 47). Bullock rightly sees here a connection to the problematic "thirtieth year" of Ezek 1:1 in his study of the relationship between the prophet-priests Jesus and Ezekiel.<sup>21</sup> The priestly setting at the very beginning of the gospel, the concern of Jesus' fulfilling correct ritual (2:22–24, 41), and the temple emphasis throughout give further support to this view.

The numerous references to Jesus' healing and cleansing ministries in the gospels identify him as the messianic priest who "will rise with healing in his wings" (Mal 4:2). His restoring act is analogous, but also at the same time superior, to that of the OT priesthood. While uncleanness was infectious and holiness could only be preserved through total separation (cf. Leviticus 12–15), Jesus touched unclean persons and made them whole and acceptable to God (e.g. Luke 8:43 ff., cf. Lev 15:25 ff.; Luke 5:12 ff., cf. Leviticus 13–14). Even the Samaritan lepers, who would not be taken care of by the Jewish priests, received the benefit of his cleansing (Luke 17:11–19).

Significant also is the fact that Jesus often deliberately healed on the Sabbath day. There is a parallel between the Sabbath as the completion of the original creation on the one hand and healing as the restoration to its wholeness on the other. Hence it was not only lawful but also fitting to heal on the Sabbath (cf. John 7:23). Matt 12:1–21 (par. Luke 6:1 ff.; Mark 2:23 ff.) is an interesting passage. Jesus' defense of his disciples' picking of grain on the Sabbath in terms of the precedent of David's eating the consecrated bread (1 Sam 21:1–6), "which was not lawful for him . . . but for the priests alone" (Matt 12:4), is often considered as merely illustrating the principle of "necessity knows no law (or, at least, the ceremonial law)"<sup>22</sup>—that is, if David broke the law for necessity's sake, why could the disciples not do the same? A closer study of 1 Sam 21:1–6, the passage to which Jesus alluded, shows that such understanding really misses his point. First, we must note that this OT episode happened on a Sabbath day, for the bread of the Presence was just being replaced (v 6; cf. Lev 24:8). This could hardly be coincidental.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the fact that Ahimelech insisted on the holiness of "the vessels of the young men" (vv 4–5) indicated that the ceremonial law, rather than being set aside for necessity's sake, was meticulously observed in spite of necessity's demand. The theory that ceremonial rules may be overruled by "higher considerations" is thus untenable. The point of Jesus' defense seems rather to be this: It was the prerogative of the priest to fill the hungry on the Sabbath (which was but another

<sup>21</sup>C. H. Bullock, "Ezekiel, Bridge Between the Testaments," *JETS* 25 (1982) 23–31. Bullock gives major attention, however, to the similarity between Ezekiel's prophetic call and Jesus' baptism rather than to the connection of their priestly status in the passage.

<sup>22</sup>E.g. J. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Volume 17* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); W. Hendriksen, *Matthew* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973); D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (London: Oliphants, 1972); E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1976); J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1977); W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1971).

<sup>23</sup>Hill (*Matthew*) observes that "according to the Midrash, the event . . . happened on a Sabbath," but he discards this information as irrelevant.

aspect of making one whole<sup>24</sup>), and the persons thus filled were therefore innocent (cf. Matt 12:7). Jesus was not granting that his disciples had technically broken the Sabbath. Rather, his answer to the Pharisees was *ad hominem*: If he and his disciples were guilty according to the Pharisaic interpretation of the law, then according to the same interpretation David and his companions, as well as Ahimelech the priest, would be guilty also. But it was granted (especially to the Jews) that David must be innocent and that the priests in the temple were innocent in "breaking the Sabbath" (v 5; the employment of such language in reference to priestly duties clearly suggested irony). Why then did they hold Jesus—the greater priest—guilty? (When Jesus said that he was "greater than the temple," did he not also imply that he was greater than the OT priests?)

When Jesus cleansed the temple (Matt 21:12–13; par. Luke 19:45–46; Mark 11:15–17) he was also exercising the authority of a priest (cf. Mal 3:1–4). It is interesting that when questioned about his authority, Jesus gave his answer in terms of the validity of John's baptism (Matt 21:23–27). The relationship of his answer to the question is difficult to ascertain. While any suggestion must remain conjectural, a plausible one is as follows: Jesus was lawfully ordained a priest if John's baptism was of divine origin. One of the requirements of one's becoming a priest was that he had to be consecrated with water by someone who was already a priest (Num 8:6–7). Such requirement was met since John was the son of Zechariah the priest (Luke 1:5, 13) and therefore a priest himself. This view was further supported by the fact that when John was baptizing, his disciples disputed with a Jew about purification (John 3:25), pointing to the priestly association of John's baptism. After all, what righteousness was Jesus fulfilling in his baptism (Matt 3:15)?<sup>25</sup>

Jesus' application to himself of Psalm 110, in which the messianic king was also a priestly figure after the order of Melchizedek, points unmistakably to his self-consciousness as the eschatological high priest (Mark 12:35–37). Cullmann rightly sees significance in the fact that when questioned by the Jewish high priest, Jesus answered with a statement about the eternal high priest that combined the thoughts of Dan 7:13 and Ps 110:1. The inevitable conclusion was that Jesus considered his task to fulfill the priestly office.<sup>26</sup>

At the death of Jesus, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). Should this scene be understood as symbolizing the free access to God's sanctuary through atonement, as connoting the termination of the OT cultic economy, or as the testimony of God's wrath on Jerusalem? Traditionally, exegetes are largely in favor of the first interpretation<sup>27</sup> in view of

<sup>24</sup>This is also indicated by the fact that vv 1–8 were put side by side with vv 9–21, a section dealing with the relationship between healing and the Sabbath day (cf. also Mark 2:23–28; 3:1–6; Luke 6:1–5, 6–11).

<sup>25</sup>The idea of this paragraph is adopted from J. E. Adams, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 17–18.

<sup>26</sup>Cullmann, *Christology* 89.

<sup>27</sup>D. P. Senior (*The Passion Narrative According to Matthew: A Redactional Study* [Leuven University, 1982] 308–309) provides lists of notable exegetes who adopted each of the three lines of interpretation.

Heb 10:19–20, in which Christ's atoning death is seen as effectuating free access to the sanctuary (cf. also Eph 2:11–19; Rom 3:25). While appreciation must be shown for the judgment motif in the passage (e.g. the earthquake in Matt 27:52; cf. also 23:38–24:2) and care must be taken against thoughtless importation of Hebrews theology into the present text, it still seems to me that the traditional interpretation is the one that accords best with Scriptural data because of the following considerations. First, comparison with the parallel account of Mark (cf. 15:37–39), in which the centurion's confession is juxtaposed to the rending of the veil (which stood as a somewhat isolated sign), suggests that the symbolism has soteriological overtones.<sup>28</sup> If Matthew's presentation consists in a development of Mark's, then the earthquake that led to the resurrection of the saints might as well point to the fulfillment of the promises made to the pious of the old dispensation<sup>29</sup> as signify judgment. Second, if judgment is the dominant motif it would more likely call for the rending of the outer curtain rather than the inner one so as to make the sign more obvious.<sup>30</sup> But it was the inner veil that was rent. This can be ascertained by the usage of the term *katapetasma*, which as a stereotyped LXX translation of the Hebrew *pārōket* always means the inner veil (cf. *aulaias*, which translates *yēri'ā*). Last but not least, the time when the veil was rent is most fitting for the access idea—the “ninth hour” (Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44) was precisely the time when the priest was offering the incense before the veil.<sup>31</sup>

After making the above remarks, however, we perhaps have no need to press the access idea to the exclusion of the judgment motif. Probably both elements are present. The accusation that led to Jesus' crucifixion was that he would destroy the earthly temple and build another made without hands (Mark 14:58). At his death there was simultaneously a judgment on the earthly temple and the opening up of the heavenly one.

### III. THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

It is the author of Hebrews who weaves together these threads (and some more) of Christ's priestly role into a multicolored fabric, an exhaustive exposition of which is beyond the scope of this article. We shall content ourselves with pointing out some salient features of Christ's priesthood pertaining to our main thesis as portrayed in this book.

We make it clear at the outset that when we speak of Christ's fulfilling the OT shadow of priesthood, we do not deny that many of these “fulfillments” are put in terms of contrasts by the author. It must be maintained, however, that

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>29</sup>N. A. Dahl, “The Passion Narrative in Matthew,” in *The Interpretation of Matthew* (ed. G. Stanton; London/Philadelphia: SPCK/Fortress, 1983).

<sup>30</sup>E.g. A. H. McNeile (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [London: Macmillan, 1955]), maintaining that Matthew “almost certainly pictured a portent visible to all,” argues for the rending of the outer curtain.

<sup>31</sup>This can be deduced from a comparison of Luke 1:10–11; Acts 3:1; 10:3–4, 30; Ps 141:2; Rev 8:3–4.



even though the priesthood of Christ is superior to that of Aaron at almost every point of discussion, it is superior only in the sense that what the Aaronic priests did typically and imperfectly, Christ perfects.<sup>32</sup> Thus while Christ's priesthood was of the order of Melchizedek, he exercised his office after the pattern of Aaron.<sup>33</sup>

The title of "high priest" was first introduced in 2:17: "He was obligated<sup>34</sup> to be made like his brethren in all things, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest." Christ had to become a man in order to become a priest. In fact, he was to be *the* man to restore God's purpose for mankind in the original creation (2:5-9; cf. Ps 8:4-6). The connection here between the priesthood and the restored man cannot escape the reader and is further confirmed by 5:7-10: Before Christ was designated high priest, he had to be perfected in obedience "in the days of his flesh."

The representational function of Christ's priesthood is also clearly expressed: "For both he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all of One, for which reason he is not ashamed to call them brethren" (2:11). This identification of Christ the high priest with the believers was an identification not only of experience (e.g. he can sympathize with our weakness, 4:15) and of nature (e.g. he is taken from among men, 5:1), but also of spiritual relation to God.<sup>35</sup> Having become a high priest, Jesus entered within the veil—i.e., the sanctuary—as a forerunner for us (6:19-20) and is even now interceding on our behalf in the presence of God (9:24; cf. 7:25). In offering up himself (7:27; cf. Eph 5:2; Mark 10:45), Christ regained for us free access to the sanctuary of God (Heb 10:19-22; cf. Zech 3:4-9). This, after all, was the goal of priesthood.

#### IV. THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

The book of Hebrews, after giving the whole emphasis to Jesus as the high priest for the very practical purpose of encouraging Christians to persevere toward their *telos*, ends with vesting a priesthood in them. As the Israelites were all in principle priests through their identification with the Aaronic priests, so also Christian believers, by virtue of their being in union with Christ, obtain a priesthood that is derived from Christ's. As already suggested above, there is a close connection between the access of believers to the sanctuary and Christ's prior access. They assume a priestly role (that is, not merely as worshippers) when they enter into the holy place, by blood, having been ritually

<sup>32</sup>The superiority of Christ's priesthood to Aaron's parallels that of the new covenant to the old; cf. G. Vos, "The Priesthood of Christ in Hebrews," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (ed. R. B. Gaffin; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 126.

<sup>33</sup>*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia: Volume 4* (ed. J. Orr; Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1937), s. v. "priest"; note that there is no further reference to Melchizedek in Hebrews after chap. 7.

<sup>34</sup>Greek *opheilen*. *Opheilō*, literally used of financial debts, is applied figuratively to any duty or obligation imposed by various circumstances; cf. BAGD.

<sup>35</sup>Vos in Gaffin, *Redemptive* 133-134.

washed.<sup>36</sup> They are given "an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat" (13:10), and it is their duty to "offer up a sacrifice of praise to God" (13:15-16; cf. Lev 19:24). In short, the OT priesthood was superseded by a priesthood that embraces all NT Christians.

This same idea of the priesthood of believers can also be seen in other NT passages. The Apocalypse portrays believers as made by Christ to be "priests to God" (Rev 1:6; cf. also 5:10; 20:6). Their prayers are likened to the altar incense (5:8; 8:3-4), the offering up of which in the old covenant was the exclusive right of the Aaronic priests (Num 16:40; cf. 2 Chron 26:16 ff.; Exod 30:34-38). In the consummation of the kingdom, the final blessedness of all Christians will consist in serving God "day and night in his temple" (Rev 7:15). Paul significantly describes his ministry to the Gentiles as a "priestly service of the gospel of God" (Rom 15:16), alluding to Isa 66:19-20, which prophesies in priestly imagery the ingathering of the Gentiles to Israel. The gifts of the Philippian believers to Paul were said to be "a pleasing aroma, an acceptable sacrifice" (Phil 4:18). All Christians are to offer their bodies as "living sacrifices," which are acceptable to God (Rom 12:1). The priestly concept of investiture of righteousness is also applied to the believers. Christians who are baptized into Christ have clothed themselves with Christ (Gal 3:27; cf. Rom 13:14). Though we may be going too far to see a deliberate conceptual link in the Christian armor (Eph 6:11) with the priestly garment, the Isaianic sources underlying Paul's metaphor of the armor clearly employ priestly language (cf. Isa 59:17; 61:10).<sup>37</sup> In Rev 19:8 the redeemed saints are those who are clothed with fine linen. This identification of the redeemed people of God as priests is very clear.

Finally, in 1 Pet 2:4-10 we find the classical proof-text for the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Unfortunately this text is frequently misapplied, in that there is often read into this doctrine the idea of "ministries" (in terms of church order, authority, offices, etc.) or even a ministerial priesthood. The believers' priesthood in this passage signifies, however, not the rights and privileges of individuals, far less a participation in any sense in the sacrificial work of Christ, but rather the electedness and holiness of the corporate people of God. Confusion abounds when one fails to realize that the believers' priestly identification with Christ is primarily in status rather than in performance, primarily in terms of worth rather than of function. The sacrificial aspect of Christ's priestly role is not to be repeated by any individual, not even by Christ himself, for it is *ephapax*, "once for all" (Heb 7:27; 10:10). It is his priestly standing before God that is imputed to every Christian believer. The function of offering spiritual sacrifices follows as a consequence of this status. These spiritual sacrifices are, strictly, not sacrificial, but refer to the holy living of Christians in a pagan world, as is clear when one considers the purpose and emphasis of 1 Peter. Therefore the priestly standing and the priestly function

<sup>36</sup>D. W. B. Robinson, *Ministry as Participation in Christ's Priesthood*, a paper presented to the Joint Working Group of the Australian Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church on the Ministry (May 1970).

<sup>37</sup>Kline, *Images* 48.

of Christians are distinct and yet complementary, being analogous to the definitive and the progressive aspects of their sanctification. Understood thus, the function and nature of the priesthood of believers are indeed put beautifully together in the present passage of 1 Peter 2. Verse 5 speaks of the priesthood in terms of offering sacrifices; v 9, echoing Exod 19:5-6, depicts this same priesthood with reference to Christians' being the continuation and consummation of the redeemed people of God.<sup>38</sup>

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion has established that the priesthood has its primary significance in typifying the redeemed (ideal) man. Divine new creation was given expression in Israel as a "kingdom of priests" under the representation of the Aaronic priesthood. Connection between the priesthood and the redeemed man is most clearly seen in the priestly garments, the investiture of which was employed as a symbol of redemption in the eschatological expectation of Israel. The Messiah, as the covenant head of the redeemed people of God, was to be a priestly figure, which found its fulfillment in Christ, both in his earthly ministries (especially those of healing and cleansing) and his atoning death. Through their union with Christ all Christian believers are vested with a priesthood that superseded that of the OT. Inasmuch as their priestly identification with Christ is a matter of status rather than of performance, any idea of a ministerial priesthood is excluded. The Christians' offering of spiritual sacrifices to God means no more and no less than the demonstration of their priestly holiness by their holy living.

It should perhaps be pointed out that in this study we have largely avoided entering into detailed discussion of related issues that are more appropriate to the sphere of systematics, important though they are. The inclusion of such would hamper the continuity of our presentation. It is expected, however, that our study will contribute to the development of the doctrine of priesthood in systematic theology, both by broadening the Scriptural basis of our thinking on this doctrine and by providing a framework in which the doctrine might be structured, or restructured, so as to rest more firmly on this Scriptural base.

<sup>38</sup>Elliot, *The Elect* 197. Elliot comes very close to identifying the priesthood with the redeemed people of God. His Catholic presuppositions, however, deter him from admitting the intimate connection between the priesthood of believers and that of Christ. Thus he sees Peter's descriptions of Christians as little more than serving the purpose of showing a continuity of the people of God, because these honorary titles were first given to Israel.