

The High Priest and His Community

I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

¹²Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. (Rev. 1:9-15)

John has received a 'revelation of Jesus Christ' (1:1). As it stands, the phrase 'of Jesus Christ' could mean 'concerning Jesus Christ' and, indeed, it almost certainly does, since so much of what is in the book of the Revelation is describing the various things which Jesus has done, is doing and will do. But it could also mean 'by Jesus Christ', meaning that he is the one who is passing on to John what God has given him. This also seems certain as the language of 1:9-15 indicates that the one who is speaking is 'one like [the] Son of Man', which of course never refers to God.

'I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet' (1:10). What could the first readers have understood by 'a loud voice like a trumpet'? All sorts of things might come to mind, though one suggestion¹ is that what lie behind the words is the gathering of the people of Israel at Sinai. Exodus 19: 13, 16 and 19, apart from being the first three uses of 'trumpet' in the Old Testament, are also in a highly significant context.

"... 'No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain." ¹⁴So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵And he said to the people, "Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman." ¹⁶On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. ¹⁹As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. (Ex. 19:13-19)

The trumpet blast was awesome. The people had been told that to go on to the mountain was forbidden but that when the trumpet sounded they may approach the boundaries. The sound of the trumpet (which could be translated as 'the voice of the trumpet') was also, by its sheer volume, an indication that the 'atmosphere [was] electric with Yahweh's Presence'.² The trumpet blew and Moses and God would

¹ It must be admitted that in all of these questions, 'suggestions' are the best that can be offered, since John has made no direct quotation from any Old Testament passage, nor has he left us any explanatory notes. The most we can do is see if the suggestions provide a reasonably consistent result. Even then, the biblical writers need not always have been totally consistent either.

² John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3), Word, Waco, 1987, p. 271.

speak to each other. The immediate context was that of the revelation of the character of the LORD in the ten ‘words’ (Ex. 20:1-17; see Ex. 20:18 for ‘the sound of the trumpet’). The character of the LORD was not incidental to the occasion, but it determined the character of the people whom he had called to himself. Trumpets and revelation, at this point at least, go together.

John turned to see the speaker, which is literally, ‘to see the voice’. Perhaps it not surprising to note that in Exodus 20:18, the people ‘saw the voice’.³ There is another occasion when the phrase appears, and that is in a Greek text of Daniel 7:11, where the context is the judgment of the evil beasts and the coming of ‘one like a son of man’ (Dan. 7:13).

When John looked, he saw ‘seven golden lampstands’ (1:12). At this point, as with most others, we should perhaps not be deflected by the *apparent* imprecision in John’s description. David Aune puts it this way:

This imagery suggests that a “temple” is the ambiance for John's vision, and it is likely that “the seven torches of fire burning before the throne” (4:5) are heavenly menorahs (at the very least they should be understood as *models* for the menorahs used in the temple), which, like the one or ones in the temple, were positioned to burn “before the Lord” (Exod 27:21; Lev 24:2-4 cf I Kgs 11:36). Since “menorah” ... is a technical term for the sacral lampstand or lampstands that stood first in the wilderness tabernacle and later in the first and second temples, the main question for the interpreter is whether the author intended these seven lampstands to be understood in that tradition.⁴

Although that is expressed in a somewhat technical way, it does add to the overall picture of the scene being one on which the tabernacle and the temple were modelled. Since the lampstands are also later identified with the seven churches (1:20), we might be able to say that John is seeing the genuine sanctuary which was the original on which the earthly representations in Israel were patterned. The seven churches (the sevenfold, or complete church?) are united by the one who stands in their midst in the great heavenly sanctuary.

This picture is filled out more when John describes the one he saw. ‘I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest.’ First he is ‘like the Son of Man’, and in the New Testament that title is most often on lips of Jesus when he is speaking of himself. Although the title appears often in the Old Testament as a reference to men and women in their humanity, the most obvious background for this use is Daniel 7 mentioned above. That person sums up in himself all the saints (or, the holy ones) of the Most High and in him their dominion is restored. ‘To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed’ (Daniel 7:14). Consistent with Psalm 8:3-8, this regal person is the son of man who now reigns, where once there had been abject defeat.

But of significance is the fact that this one like the Son of Man is dressed in high priestly robes: he is ‘clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest’. The word translated by ‘a long robe’⁵ is only used here in the New Testament, though

in all but one of its seven occurrences in the LXX it is used in connection with the attire of the high priest. The girdle of the high priest was made of fine twined linen and embroidered with needle work (Ex. 39:29), while the girdle which gathered together the long robe of the

³ See David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC 52A, Word, Dallas, 1997, p. 87.

⁴ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 88f (italics his).

⁵ ποδήρης.

exalted Christ was of gold. Josephus, however, speaks of the priest's girdle as being interwoven with gold. This, plus the fact that high girding ("at the breasts") denotes the dignity of an important office, suggests that this part of the description as well is intended to set forth the high priestly function of Christ.⁶

When John describes the head and hair of Christ, 'white as white wool, white as snow', we might be drawn back to Daniel 7, where it is said of the Ancient of Days (God himself) that 'his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool' (Dan. 7:9). There it is God who is described that way, while here it is the Son of Man, but that need not be a problem, since the Son of Man was always intended to be the image of God. But that is speculation, and Mounce quotes Caird who

wisely cautions against overinterpretation, noting that to track down the source of each descriptive phrase and compile a catalogue would be "to unweave the rainbow." John uses his allusions 'for their evocative and emotive power ... His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing ... to call forth from his readers the same response of overwhelming and annihilating wonder which he experienced in his prophetic trance.'⁷

Of course, the language used does not *precisely* match anything with which people may have been familiar from their various backgrounds. But it was not intended to do so. All those earthly things were in fact intended to be representations and anticipations of the great reality, which is the heavenly sanctuary, where Christ stands as King and High Priest forever. John has been given to see that and so his work expresses that sense of overwhelming wonder and awe. In fact he describes the effect of his vision of Christ: 'I fell at his feet as though dead' (1:17).

CHRIST OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

It is important to ask what is our response to knowing that Christ is our King and our great High Priest. What happened to John was far more than the effect of a powerful emotional experience. He saw the truth of Christ, who he is and what he is doing, and has described what he saw without explaining it; he just declares it. However, there is another part of Scripture which does explain it and that is the Letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews commences by declaring that God's Son is the definitive revelation of God. But he is also the definitive revelation of what Man is and the writer stresses this by noting that the authority which was given to Man, 'the son of man' (Heb. 2:6) at creation, with a view to the world to come, is only seen in Jesus (Heb. 2:5-9).

Adam was created to rule creation, to have dominion over all the works of God (Gen. 1:26-28). But the writer has a more complex picture of Adam to present, for in Genesis 2:15, when commanded to 'till' and 'keep' the garden Adam is actually given priestly duties within the sanctuary of Eden. The two Hebrew words for 'till' and 'keep' are only used elsewhere in combination to refer to the duties of the Levites (Num. 3:7-8; 8:26) to the duties of Aaron and his sons (Num. 18:5-6),⁸ so the first readers of Genesis 2 would have probably recognised the words as being associated with their experience of worship in Israel.

There was also Eden itself. It was a garden, but the language used indicates that it was

⁶ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977, p. 78.

⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 78.

⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC), Word, Milton Keynes, 1987, 1991, p. 67.

a special place separated from the outside world, which is presumably very much like our present world. [It was] separated from a world that needs to be brought under the dominion of the divine rule, for which Eden is a model.

... Genesis 2:9-17 depicts what seems to have been a sanctuary situation, in which man as priest/king worships in the sanctuary garden, the world center, which is Eden.⁹

To be a true human being demands that Adam is both priest in Eden and, under God, its king.

A common image of a priest is one of the offering of propitiatory sacrifices, turning away the wrath of an offended deity. For Adam at that point, that could hardly have been the case. But there is far more to priesthood than that. Even the offerings by Cain and Abel demonstrate the variety of sacrifices which Israel understood and practiced. In Israel, and I am suggesting that the creation story is told using their terms and expectations, priesthood was a most solemn matter. Israel was God's own possession, chosen with a view to them being a kingdom and priests among the nations. Within their life, then there was the need for propitiatory sacrifices, that is, there was the need for their sin to be dealt with and that on a regular basis. But that propitiatory aspect was with a view to Israel then being the priestly community of God. They were a holy people, set apart for him. Their inheritance, the land, was intended to demonstrate to all the nations that the whole earth is the LORD's along with its fulness. What is more, the nations would see in Israel, that worship was far more than a cultic activity. Worship was the whole of life. That is probably why so much of the 'Law' contains regulations for everyday living interspersed with more 'religious' details. For Israel, contrary to some modern rationalisations about the law, there was simply no separation between secular and sacred. In this way, at least, Israel was to express the truth of what it is to be fully human.

In order to be the people of God, Israel itself needed a priesthood, as I have said, to offer propitiatory sacrifices, but then to lead the nation in its worship. Because of their weaknesses, the priests were to intercede for the people by their 'tilling and keeping' the sanctuary, the tabernacle and then the temple. All of this was because that was what it was for Adam to be the priest in Eden and God would not see that purpose fail.

Also, because the relationship of the man and the woman in the garden was described by Paul as an anticipation or expression of Christ and his church, we can also say that behind and conditioning the priesthood of Adam lay the great priesthood of Christ. And John saw that. He saw Christ, the Son of Man and High Priest of the heavenly sanctuary, which is where Revelation 21 brings us. Although the language is basically that of Israel's experience of priests and tabernacle, what we are seeing is the wondrous reality which was expressed in that way.

Christ had to become fully Man in order to be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17). But his high priestly role transcends anything in Israel. He is 'a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek' (Heb. 5:6; Ps. 110:4). Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of the Most High God (Heb. 7:1) and as Christ is a priest *forever* according to that order, he stands as one whose service will never need to be replaced.

The Levitical priests serve in a sanctuary which, by its limitations, cannot be permanent, only a copy of the reality. But Christ entered into heaven itself, and the sacrifice he offered on our behalf was himself, his own blood (Heb. 9:24-26). Now, as high priest in the presence of God forever, he 'always lives to make intercession for'

⁹ William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 19.

us (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34). The beneficiaries of his sacrifice and intercession are not passive observers; they are those whose consciences are purified once and for all through his blood in order that they may worship the living God (Heb. 9:14). Some translations read ‘*serve* the living God’, but the word always refers to service in a religious setting, the activities associated with worship. That means, then, that being cleansed from a conscience which must of necessity accuse us of guilt, we are restored to the worship for which we were created. To be ‘a new creation’ in Christ includes that amazing aspect.

Hebrews also stresses that those who are cleansed by Christ are now sanctified. That does not mean that they have achieved some standard of perfection in moral matters.¹⁰ They are sanctified, taken by God and made his own, in order to be fully functional in worship.

This brief summary, while hardly doing justice to the grandeur of Christ’s ministry, does lead us to see that the work of the high priest was always with a view to the whole community being engaged in worship. Aaron’s service permitted Israel to be what they were redeemed to be:

‘Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites. (Exodus 19:5-6)

Revelation 1:9-15 seems to contain all of that in its imagery. But there is confirmation earlier in the chapter.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Rev. 1:5-6).

This is not just the language of Israel at Sinai: this is what Israel at Sinai prefigured. The Son of Man has restored the regal dignity of humanity and as high priest he has made us into the priesthood for which we have been created. He has done this by washing us and freeing us from our sins by his blood.

¹⁰ Sanctification is not a process which follows after justification. It is the state of being separated by God for himself. While we may grow *in* sanctification (cf. 2 Pet. 3:18) we cannot grow *into* it, as it is the result of being liberated from sin and enslaved to God, which is totally the gift of God in Christ (Rom. 6:22).