

The Church as Heir of Israel's Vocation as Royal Priesthood

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Before the advent of higher criticism, students of scripture took it for granted that one read the Bible as a whole. With the introduction of higher criticism in the 19th century, this "naïve assumption" was roundly rejected. In its place, the scholars argued there were many "sources," some of which provided competing approaches to an array of different topics¹. In the mid-20th century, Brevard Childs championed the idea of "canonical" criticism. While not rejecting source criticism outright, he argued that the canon was the authoritative set of documents that the church accepted as its scripture.² As such, it needed to be examined and studied as a whole. Later, other scholars argued that the literary merits of the text demonstrated far more cohesiveness than had previously been recognized.³ Hence, reading scripture as a cohesive unit found new traction.

Scholars who worked from a presupposition of biblical inspiration and authority, welcomed this renewed interest in the canon of scripture and contributed to the discussion by showing how various key themes of biblical teaching developed throughout scripture. Hence, the discipline of biblical theology was given renewed attention in scholarly circles.

One theme that has perplexed Old Testament (OT) scholarship over the last century has been the idea of and role for the priests in Israel's religion. Source criticism argued that Israel had an evolving view of priests. Originally when its religious ideas were in their infancy, every head of the household served as the priest of his own family. This was represented in Israel's early documents such as J and E. But as the nation evolved and its government became more complex, there was a concurrent development in the nature and role of the priesthood. This specialization is portrayed in the P documents which reveal a well-developed and organized priesthood, serving the nation at a central location. This priestly community wanted to protect their territory and hence needed to eliminate the idea that worship could take place anywhere. Laws centralizing worship and restricting those who could officiate at the altar appeared at the instigation of this priestly community. Religious complexity was introduced to protect the interests of the specialist community. Does this theory do justice to the biblical record especially when read from a canonical perspective? I do not believe that it does. This paper will endeavor to argue, that when read canonically, scripture always intended that all God's people participate in priestly activity as servants of God.

Two key texts that establish this trajectory are Exodus 19:4-6 and its NT use in 1 Peter 2:9-10. Before exegeting these texts, it is important to observe that while the biblical canon gives us a chronological view of salvation history, it does not reflect the order in which Israel received these texts. Israel received the stories of their forefathers, the patriarchs, after they had experienced the redemption of God from Egypt and most probably after the covenant was formed at Sinai. Their early history is provided to give perspective to their redemption and to enable them to understand who they are and why this happened to them. In a sense, the primeval and patriarchal history is prologue to their redemption experience. This is an important observation if we are to read the scriptures accurately.⁴

ISRAEL'S CALLING AS A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

After Israel was delivered from Egypt, Moses, at God's direction, led the people to Sinai. There, as they camped before the mountain, God summoned Moses to ascend the mountain and God gave to him a message for the people. The message is bracketed by the similar clauses "thus you shall speak to the sons of Jacob and you shall report to the sons of Israel" (v. 3) and "these are the words which you shall say to the sons of Israel" (v.6). The clauses emphasize the importance and the content of the message which God is entrusting to Moses.

The message began with a reminder of God's gracious intervention in deliverance for his people. Israel had witnessed God fighting against the Egyptians who had so callously enslaved and oppressed them. They had seen how God had ravaged Egypt's land, destroyed their herds and decimated their people by destroying all of the firstborn of Egypt. By the end, Pharaoh and the people had begged the Israelites to leave Egypt, even giving them their jewelry as they left.⁵

Israel had also experienced the kindness of God towards them. The image used to describe this care is that of a mother eagle bearing her young on her back to bring them to a place of safety. God's demonstration of that parental care had included feeding them with manna when they had no food, providing water in the dry land of the wilderness, protecting them against marauding bands, and giving them a leader in Moses to guide them into God's future for them. Against the background of God's grace to them demonstrating a relationship already formed, God then sets before Israel the stipulation that there will be protocol for enjoying this relationship for the future.

The pattern reflected in this order is that which marks Hittite, suzerainty treaties. After stating the overlord's title, the treaties then narrated the ways in which this overlord had acted in the interests of the covenant partner. This signified a *de facto* relationship that was to be formalized by the treaty being established. It included stipulations which described the protocol for the ongoing relationship.⁶

Moses' message was preparing Israel for the formal treaty that was to come. "If Israel will obey [God's] voice and keep his covenant" references the formal stipulations that will be laid down. In what followed, the nature of the relationship was outlined; "you shall be my treasured possession

among all peoples for all the earth is mine; you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:5-6a). Wright points out that this is a programmatic statement with the chiasmic structure of these words showing the nature of the relationship between God and Israel and the reason for it.⁷

Three phrases are used to describe the substance of the relationship. First Israel was to be “God’s special possession.” The Hebrew word used here is *segulla* and is used secularly to describe the king’s personal treasure as opposed to the national treasure (1 Chron 29:3). The qualifying phrase, “for all the earth is mine” is intended to designate the unique status that is being granted to the nation over against God’s general possession of the world at large. Israel is being favored as the people who bring God particular delight and pleasure because they share God’s character and his purposes.⁸

The second description identified Israel as a “kingdom of priests” (*mamlaket cohenim*). It is not simply that Israel has special status with God but they also share a unique task for God. The idea of “priests” in the ancient world was linked to mediation between people and the deity. That is true in the OT as well, where priests were charged with the responsibility of teaching the law of God so people could live in relationship with God and attending to the sacrificial protocols that enabled those who offended the deity to be restored to him. “God confers on Israel as a whole people the role of being his priesthood in the midst of the nations. As the people of YHWH they would have the historical task of bringing the knowledge of God to the nations and bringing the nations to the means of atonement with God.”⁹ This calling is tied to God’s plan to reclaim his world for his glory.

But the task required Israel to be in a particular state to be able to take on this role. They themselves had to be holy. Hence they are called to be a holy nation. Their fulfilling this would not only prepare them for their role to others but would also sanctify their world to God, since holiness extended beyond simple moral purity.

Following this description God met with Israel to formalize his covenant with them. This is found in what is called the covenant code in Exodus 20-24. The initial section included the principal stipulations for living in the presence of God. These were unique in that they were delivered by the voice of God himself to the Israelite people. They set the broad boundaries for living in the presence of God as the people of God. At this point the people asked Moses to mediate God’s word to them because they were overwhelmed by

the voice of God. This request introduced a tension into the narrative since the priestly role involved living in the presence of God.

The rest of the code was given through Moses as the mediator. The laws that followed were in the form of case laws. They dealt with social matters, physical matters and spiritual directions that pertain to worship. In the code, there is an expectation that the people will draw near to God. For instance, the law of the altar described how to make an altar for worshipping the Lord either of dirt or of uncut stone (Exod 20:24-26). Direction was given about the firstfruits offerings that were to be made (22:29-30), about keeping sabbaths and the major pilgrimage feasts (23:10-17) and about not offering anything leavened with the blood of the sacrifices. Clearly these instructions assumed that the people would be serving at altars before the Lord. In fact before the elders ascended the mountain to meet with God in a covenant meal, Moses offered sacrifices and sprinkled the people with blood. The sacrifices were made by "the young men of the people of Israel" (24:5) who were likely the firstborn of families representing the people. Thus the nation is acting in its role as a priestly people at Sinai.

PRIESTHOOD IN THE PRIMEVAL AND PATRIARCHAL PERIOD

The calling of Israel to this task was not something new in God's purposes. A review of the primeval and patriarchal history demonstrates this. God created Adam to be a priest-king in the Garden of Eden. The Garden is portrayed in language that is subsequently used of Israel's places of worship.¹⁰ Adam is placed in that garden environment and charged with the task of "cultivating and guarding it." These two Hebrew words when used elsewhere together "refer either to Israelites 'serving' God and 'guarding' [keeping] God's word (approximately 10 times) or to priests who 'keep' the 'service' (or 'charge') of the tabernacle."¹¹ The writer clearly intended to portray that Adam was created to be a priest in the dwelling place of God. The assumption is that his offspring would serve with him in this calling.

But sin entered the world and the man and his wife are excluded from the garden temple and removed from their role as priest kings. While they continued to physically live, they were separated from God and his presence. They had forfeited their role because they have not served the interests of God in his world and protected it from evil. Instead of bringing God's blessing

to the world, they brought God's curse upon it.

God was not done with his people. Arising from Adam and Eve came a line of descendants who were God fearers. They "call[ed] upon the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26). Though that line is all but lost in the expanding corruption of the society of that period, a few righteous do remain who guard God's interest in the world. They are represented by Noah, of whom it is said, "he was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:9). He mediated God to the world by proclaiming God's righteousness and guarding God's world through his building the ark (Heb 11:7; 2 Peter 2:5). After the world was cleansed through the judgment of the flood, Noah and his family, together with the animals that had been preserved in the ark, were appointed to repopulate it. God's covenant was renewed with them. Prior to the renewal, one of the first acts that marked Noah upon exiting the ark is the priestly task of building an altar and offering sacrifice to the Lord (Gen 8:20). The renewal of the covenant may even be said to be in response to the worship offered. It is with this priestly family that the future is entrusted. But again, Noah failed and allowed sin to enter his world. It expanded its corrosive influence into humanity, finding expression in the rebellion of Babel.

Once more God intervened to call out Abram from that world to form him into a new Adam, who would be the head of a new society of faithful priests. His calling was to be a blessing to the nations as he brought God to his world and his world to God. Abram responded in faith to the call of God to leave his old world and to follow God to the place he would show him. Upon entering that place that God identified as his inheritance, we are told that "Abram built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him" (Gen 12:7). What characterized Abram while dwelling in the land is that he built altars and called upon the name of the Lord (13:4, 18; 21:13). Moreover Abram engaged in other priestly activity. He protected the land from evil as he delivered it from the kings of the east, interceded for Abimelech regarding the curse that had come upon he and his family after having taken Sarah into his harem, and he taught his children God's ways (Gen 18:19).

Similarly, Isaac and Jacob acted as priests, building altars and calling upon the name of the Lord (Gen 26:25; 33:20, 35:7; 46:1). All of their worship took place in the context of the Promised Land, the "new Eden" or place identified with God and his dwelling. They served God in his place as a priestly community.

It is this background that is provided by Moses to Israel to give to them an understanding of their calling as a priestly people. They are the legitimate heirs of the patriarchs to bring the blessing of God's presence to the world. God would call them his "first born son" (Exod 4:22-23) who were given the responsibilities of mediating God's blessing to their world.

THE PLACE OF THE LEVITICAL PRIESTHOOD IN ISRAEL

So then why does the Levitical priesthood emerge in Israel if the whole nation was to be a priesthood and all might offer sacrifices? It seemed that God was aware of the limitations of his people, signaled earlier by their fear of being in his presence. Immediately after the covenant code is given to Israel through Moses, God again called Moses to ascend the mountain and receive instruction about the building of the tabernacle and the making of its furnishings that were to represent God's presence in Israel. In the description of the building, furnishing and staffing of the tabernacle that is provided, the place of Aaron and his sons is described. They were to be chosen out of Israel, attired in garments that distinguished them from the people and were to be consecrated to God for tabernacle service. God was "to dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them" (Exod 29:45-46). The preparations that God was instructing Moses to make including the sanctification of Aaron and his sons, had in view facilitating God being present with his people.¹²

Before Moses could bring this to the people for implementation, the people grew fearful and anxious about Moses' absence. They thought that he was lost on the mountain and demanded that Aaron make gods who could lead them into their future. They too wanted God present but they wanted him on their terms and in their timing. Consequently Israel committed the great sin of the golden calf. Whether the calf was to represent God or to replace God is not of great consequence. What is of significance was that Israel's effort to bring God into their presence violated the specific protocols that God had given for his dwelling in their midst. Those actions made God angry with his people. Hahn writes,

Because they have “corrupted” (*sihet*) themselves, Yahweh threatens to destroy them. The Hebrew word for “corrupted” (*sihet*) in 32:7 is significant. The word is used in Leviticus 19:7 to describe a defect which disqualifies a man from priestly service in the sanctuary ... God had promised Israel at Sinai: ‘If you keep my covenant ... then you shall be a kingdom of priests’ (Exod 19:5-6). Israel failed to fulfill its vocation; it failed to ‘keep covenant’. Consequently Israel loses the right to serve God as a ‘kingdom of priests.’ The expression ‘kingdom of priests’ is not applied to Old Testament Israel as a nation ever again (see 1 Pet 2:9).¹³

When Moses descended from the mountain and saw the idolatrous worship going on, he called for those who were on the Lord’s side to come to him. It was the sons of Levi who responded to him and they were sent to inflict God’s judgment upon their sons and brothers. As a result, “they were ordained for the service of the Lord” (Exod 32:29). This movement from all Israel as priests, represented by the firstborn, to the tribe of Levi who replaced the first born resulted from the golden calf incident. Having demonstrated themselves committed to the holiness of God, the Levites were conscripted to serve the function of guarding God’s holiness within the community. Summarizing his discussion of the events at Sinai, Hahn comments,

After the golden calf, Moses, Aaron and the Levites are elevated to positions of mediation, at the expense of the other tribes and their firstborn sons. As a result, Israel’s firstborn status and royal priestly vocation to be a holy nation before God and the nations was dramatically changed (at least temporarily). This reconfiguration included the addition of various cultic laws having a penitential purpose.¹⁴

Was it God’s intention that the Levitical community should entirely replace the priestly role of the nation and formalize it as an institution? I suggest that it was not. Rather this tribe was to serve in the midst of the people as an example of what holy living and serving was all about. Their presence was intended to facilitate the restoration of the nation to this priestly task. One text of scripture that bears this out is that found in Leviticus 10. Just after the Aaronic family is consecrated to their priestly functions, Nadab and Abihu took their censers and apparently put fire in them that was not taken from the altar. Likely other failure to heed the instruction Moses had provided about this task was also involved. God blazed forth in a fire

that killed them both. Moses' comment to Aaron is telling: "This is what the Lord has said, 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before the people I will be glorified'" (Lev 10:3). It seems clear that Moses is emphasizing the modeling role that the priests had before Israel. They were to demonstrate what holiness entailed for those who served God so that the people would be instructed in it. Wenham makes the point well: "The whole nation was called to be holy but how much more responsibility rested on the priests whose duty was to perform the sanctifying rituals and to teach the people the way of holiness."¹⁵ Immediately following this stunning event, God said to Aaron that the priests were to "distinguish between the holy and the common and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses" (Lev 10:10-11). This fits with their task of restoring the people to holiness and faithfulness to God so as to fulfill their calling as priests to the nations.

What followed this was a series of laws that were intended to spell out what holiness involved for God's people. These laws, known as the holiness code, touched every area of life. Worship, sexuality, farm practices, dietary laws and much more were all included in these instructions for all of one's behavior mattered. A major refrain in this instruction was "You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2; 20:7, 26; etc). These directions had in view the people's holiness which enabled them to serve as God's representatives in the world. The Levites were entrusted with the book of the law and commanded to teach it regularly to the people (Deut 31:26; 33:10).

When the first generation sinned by failing to trust God to give the land, God condemned them to die in the wilderness. After forty years of wandering, that generation has passed and a new generation that was supposedly committed to God was raised up. As they approached Moab, Balak sought to have Balaam curse them. But his curses were turned to blessing. Balaam then advised Balak to bring curse upon Israel by instigating idolatrous immorality and inviting Israel to participate. They did as he advised and God's wrath erupted against his people. It was only halted when Phinehas the high priest speared an Israelite leader and the Moabite cult prostitute that he was involved with. Phinehas' zeal for God earned him and his family a lasting position as priests who guarded God's holiness. Hahn comments, "Phinehas' high priestly grant is comparable to the levitical grant in Exodus 32:29 (see Mal

2:4-8) though narrower in scope and loftier in dignity ... At the same time, the grant to Phinehas serves to purify, preserve and strengthen the *Levitical* covenant of priesthood.¹⁶

Later, when Moses had led the people to the Plains of Moab prior to their entrance into the Promised Land, he warned them repeatedly to keep the laws and instructions that had been entrusted to them (Deut 6:1-2, 24-25; 8:1; 10:12-13; 11:8; etc). If they obeyed, they would enjoy the blessings of God upon them. Failure to obey would bring curse upon them and they would be removed from the land (Deut 30:11-20), once again forfeiting their role of blessing the world. Moses ensured that all his instruction was written in a book and this book was given to the Levites to be placed by the ark of the covenant both as a witness against Israel but also so that it could be taught to the people of each new generation (Deut 31:25-27).

THE PRIESTLY ROLE IN THE PROPHETS

It is the prophets who document Israel's loyalty to the commandments of God and hence how effectively they serve as a priesthood. The Former Prophets trace the failure of the people to keep his covenant and to obey his commandments. Comparatively little is said about the priestly leadership role in the narratives of Israel's history. Nevertheless, when mentioned, the priests are usually censured for their failure to lead the nation in holiness.

One of the final two stories in the Book of Judges is that of the idol shrine that Micah set up. It is intended to illustrate the growing apostasy in Israel. Micah stole his mother's silver and ended up using it to make a household idol. He first appointed his son to be priest, probably something that had precedent in Israel's earliest history, but when a Levite came along, he displaced his son and ordained the Levite. What is shocking here is that a Levite, charged with guarding the holiness of God, would consent to serving at an idol shrine. Subsequently the Levite conspired with the Danites to accompany them on their mission to displace the people of Laish and establish the new city of Dan. He then became their priest officiating at their religious high place with Micah's idol as its center piece. The story ended with the revelation that this was a descendent of none other than Moses.

Following this, we are given the story in Samuel of the behavior of the sons of Eli the high priest. They disrespected the sacrifices of YHWH, insisting

on the best portion of the sacrificial animal for themselves before they were sacrificed. Instead of facilitating Israel's worship of God they corrupted it by their selfish behavior. Moreover, they also engaged in sexual immorality with the women who came to worship. These accounts point to the fact that those called to model holiness before Israel and to lead them in lives of holiness were instead corrupting the people and defiling the holy place. In his oracle of judgment against Eli's house, God promised to "raise up for myself a faithful priest who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever" (1 Sam 2:35).

During Saul's reign, the priests and Levites are seldom mentioned. What is recorded is the tragic murder of the High Priest, Ahimelech and his family because he was accused of aiding and abetting David on his flight from Saul. Abiathar, the only son to escape Saul's treacherous murder of the priestly family, joined David in exile and played a more positive role in encouraging David in seeking the Lord. Subsequently he served as priest in David's tenure as king along with Zadok (2 Sam 8:16-17). But after the coronation of Solomon, Abiathar is relieved of his duties in fulfillment of the prophecies against the house of Eli.

In the rest of OT history, the priests do not play a major part. The focus seemed to be upon the leadership of the king in covenant keeping. It is true that at times certain priests served as counselors to the kings such as Jehoiada did for Joash or Azariah did for Uzziah when he tried to block him from burning incense in the temple. But they did not actively lead the people in holiness as they had been mandated to do.

In the post exilic Books of Chronicles, more attention is given to the priestly function of leading worship and offering the sacrifices. The Chronicler described how David had the Levites and priests bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and instituted the worship of YHWH there. The priests and Levites were assigned to their courses to lead worship and to offer sacrifices. More formal organization was established as David neared the end of his life in anticipation of the building of the temple under Solomon (1 Chron 23-26). The chronicler suggested that this organizational structure was implemented when the temple was finally completed.

But it wasn't long before formal worship was compromised. When the northern tribes broke away from Judah and Benjamin, Jeroboam made golden

calves and set them in Dan and Bethel. He appointed priests from whoever wished to serve and corrupted the worship of YHWH. Then in the south under Rehoboam and his successors, syncretism found its way into Judah's worship too. There were times of renewal under Asa and then Jehosaphat, Joash and Uzziah. The climax of restored worship came with Hezekiah and Josiah who both cleansed the defiled temple and rededicated the priests and Levites in their service. But these changes always seemed to be initiated by the king. Does this suggest that the historian is in fact preparing his readers for the demise of the Levitical priesthood and the rise of another priestly influence?

In fact the writing prophets condemned the priests for failing to teach the people the word of God. For example, Hosea contended with the priests,

“Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also reject you as my priests;
because you have ignored the law of your God,
I also will ignore your children.

⁷The more priests there were,
the more they sinned against me;
they exchanged their glorious God for something disgraceful (Hos 4:6-7).

Much later, Jeremiah also condemned them:

“A horrible and shocking thing
has happened in the land:

³¹The prophets prophesy lies,
the priests rule by their own authority,
and my people love it this way.

But what will you do in the end? (Jer 5:30-31; cf. Micah 3:1; Ezek 22:26).

And again,

“From the least to the greatest,
all are greedy for gain;
prophets and priests alike,
all practice deceit.

¹⁴They dress the wound of my people

as though it were not serious.
'Peace, peace,' they say,
when there is no peace. (Jer 6:13-14).

Throughout the period of the kings then, the priests and Levites were negligent in their responsibility to attend to the task of guarding God's holiness and teaching the people to follow God's commandments. Israel's disobedience finally led to the exile in 722 BC by the Assyrians and Judah followed beginning in 603 BC under the Babylonian regime.

One would have thought that after the people returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, the priests would be conscientious about instructing the people in God's ways. The pattern that Ezra set of reading and teaching the law to the people would be adhered to (Neh 8:8). Indeed the priests and Levites were assigned their roles in the reconstructed temple and expected to fulfill them. But even before Nehemiah had ended his tenure as governor, Eliashib the high priest had compromised himself with Tobiah the Ammonite by preparing him a place within the temple confines. Nehemiah dealt severely with him because of this.

Within a few years of this, Malachi would carry God's word of judgment to the priests:

The lips of the priest should guard knowledge and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts. But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi says the Lord of Hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instructions (Mal 2:7-9).

Joyce Baldwin notes that "God was misrepresented first by [the priests'] unworthy lives and then by their erroneous teaching."¹⁷ This would result in judgment.

But this is not the end of the story. Isaiah did indeed prophesy that judgment would come upon the people of God but he also foresaw a time when God's servant would bring change to the world. Anointed by the Spirit, he would proclaim liberty. The fortunes of God's people would be reversed and instead of sadness there would be joy and rejoicing. Foreigners who once

oppressed would now serve them and God's people would be called "the priests of the Lord; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God" (Isa 61:6). Motyer writes, "The hitherto unrealized ideal of Exodus 19:6 [is] fully realized in the priesthood of all believers."¹⁸

Similarly Jeremiah saw a day when God would make a new covenant with his people. In that time "David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offering and to make sacrifices forever" (Jer 33:18). God compared the certainty of this to his covenant with the day and the night. "As the hosts of the heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the offspring of David my servant and the Levitical priests who minister to me" (Jer 33:22). The multiplication of the priests is what is so important for our theme. It appears that there is merging of the people as a whole with the community of the priests. The prophet described the people with whom this new covenant is established as those who no longer need the law of God taught to them because "they all know me from the least of them to the greatest" (Jer 31:34). The work of teaching the people will have come to its fruition for all will know and do the will of God. That is precisely what the work of the Levitical tribe was to accomplish.

Ezekiel concluded his prophecy with a lengthy vision about the restoration of true worship in a new temple and with a purified priesthood. They serve under a new Davidic prince who himself serves in a priestly role. Hahn says, "For Ezekiel, the Davidic messiah is destined to embody the royal priestly ideal of Israel as "a kingdom of priests."¹⁹

Malachi too, after indicting the priests and Levites for their failure, spoke of a time coming when "the Lord whom you seek would suddenly come to his temple and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming ... He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years." (Mal 3:1, 3). Baldwin's comment is to the point:

The refiner who sits and concentrates all his attention on the metal in the crucible depicts something of the concern of the Lord for the holiness of his people. He begins at his sanctuary (cf., Ezk 9:6) with *the sons of Levi* to purify them . . .

Only then will the rest of the population, who no doubt undergo the purifying process, be able to offer what is *pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old*. The last phrase is indefinite, being used to refer both to the time of Moses (Is. 63:9, 11; Mt. 7:14) and of David (Am 9:11).²⁰

A time is coming when a purified people will again embrace their calling as faithful priests. It is with this future in view that the NT opens.

JESUS AND THE PRIESTLY ROLE

The beginning of the gospel narrative in Luke starts with the birth of John the Baptist. Zechariah, his father is a priest so that John is from the tribe of Levi. He is explicitly linked to the one who prepared the way for the coming of the Lord by restoring the people to right relationship to God, thus fulfilling the role of the priests (Luke 1:17, 76). That task included teaching the commandments of God and calling for repentance.

Jesus then came as the messenger of the covenant spoken of by Malachi. He did take up his work as a refiner. That began with confronting the religious leaders of Israel. At the age of twelve, he is found in the temple in discussion with the teachers (Luke 2:46). Later, throughout his public ministry, Jesus was in conflict with the religious leaders. Jesus said that they were blind guides (Matt 15:14) and accused them of laying “burdens too hard to bear upon their hearers” (Luke 11:46; Matt 23:4). By contrast, Jesus embraced the role of “rabbi” teaching the people what God’s commandments were intended to communicate. Matthew presents Jesus as the teacher of the law *par excellence*. In the sermon materials recorded in Matthew 5-7, Jesus specifically said that while his hearers had heard the interpretation of various commandments, he was imparting to them the real intent of it.

As Jesus inaugurated his ministry in Nazareth, he specifically cited Isaiah 61:1-2 and declared that this text was being fulfilled in their hearing (Luke 4:18-21). This is the same passage that spoke of the day when foreigners would serve Israel and call them the priests of God. Jesus, by his ministry, was inaugurating this new reality.

Moreover Jesus as the perfect Israelite took seriously his role as a member of the royal priesthood. He demonstrated what it was to restore people to God as the priests were to do. For instance, to the woman who entered Simon’s

house at the time when Jesus was eating there, he could say “Your sins are forgiven” (Luke 7:48). The same is true of Jesus’ encounter with the paralytic who was brought to him by his friends. He too is forgiven by Jesus and then healed (Luke 5:20-25). He mediated the reconciliation of sinners to God.

Ultimately Jesus was the one who offered the perfect sacrifice for sins. The writer to the Hebrews elaborated on this task. He contrasted the sacrifices of the high priests which had to be repeatedly offered to that of Christ who offered one sacrifice and then took his place at the right hand of the Father (Heb 9:25-26; 10:11-12).

The superiority of Jesus as priest is established by the author of Hebrews in that he connected him with Melchizedek, who is said to be both king and priest. His eternal life gives him an eternal position which trumps that of the Levitical priests. As the writers comments, “He holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever” (Heb 7:24).

CHRISTIANS AND THEIR PRIESTLY CALLING

It follows that just as the Levitical family received the responsibility to mediate God to the community, those who belong to the family of Jesus, the great high priest are part of the priestly community too.²¹ The NT writers develop this theme.

One of the crucial texts is 1 Peter 2. Peter has been teaching his readers, who are called the “chosen ones” scattered among the people of the world that they are to live holy lives. He cited as evidence, the frequent statement from Leviticus that “you shall be holy because I am holy” (1 Pet 1:16) to undergird his command. That was given to Israel in the context of their being assigned the priestly task of mediating God to the world. Now the believers that Peter addressed are required to act in a similar way. Two reasons for this are provided.

First, holiness is the right response to the grace of God that has redeemed us. Believers have been born again through the atoning work of Christ and the promise of God’s word that is imperishable (1 Pet 1:18-23). Holy living is the right response to “having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth” (1 Pet 1:23).

Second, holiness is right because of who we have become. Peter says that first we are “living stones” that are formed into a holy temple. The component

parts of a temple were to be carefully formed and dedicated so as to create a holy space for God to dwell in. Cleansing rituals were carried out in both the tabernacle and temple at the time of their dedication (Exod 40:9-16; 1 Kgs 8; 2 Chron 5) and God's presence filled them demonstrating his acceptance of these places of his dwelling. That image is now applied to the church as community to indicate that it too is the dwelling place of God. As such it must be holy.

But Peter transitions from the temple image to a priesthood image. The believers are a "holy priesthood" too with the task of offering "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God" (1 Pet 2:5). At this point in his argument, he borrowed the text of Exodus 19 to apply to these believers.²² They are a "chosen race, a royal priesthood a holy nation, a people for his own possession." Their priestly function is to offer sacrifices of praise to the one who had delivered them from a world of darkness (i.e., hostility to God) to a world of light. This work is done in the "Gentile" world. Their conduct there is crucial to the impact that their praises will have on that world. It is clear that the work of these priestly peoples will have the effect of leading the Gentiles to glorify God as they are brought near to him.

And Peter is not alone in describing the church's role in priestly terms. Paul for instance, after describing God's great salvation, spoke about "presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). The writer to the Hebrews called believers to "continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb 13:15). In addition they were "to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb 13:16). In the same vein, Paul said that the Philippians' gifts to him were sacrifices that were pleasing to God (Phil 4:18).

Finally in his doxology, John praised Jesus as the one who "has loved us and cleansed us by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (Rev 1:5). Again he recorded the song of praise offered by the elders, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our to our God . . ." (Rev 5:9-10). In keeping with this, John concluded his revelation with the people of God in the presence of God, in the world where there is nothing unclean bringing him glory.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

Reformed theologians have often stressed the “priesthood of all believers.” In light of what we have said, this is an important truth. But what are the implications of this for the church today? First, we must take seriously our priestly calling. We must own this calling as the people of God. Second, it is crucial that we be serious about living holy lives. Peter’s emphasis upon being holy is because we are a royal priesthood. As we have seen, the priestly role is compromised by unholy living. We cannot show the world the character of God by impure living. Has the failure to appreciate this role led to an indifference to sin and holy living? Is that why the evangelical church is increasingly tolerant of sin in its midst? Paul instructed the Corinthian church to take action to root out sin from its midst. That meant church discipline. That is still a necessary function of the church if we are to be a holy community.

Second, just as the priestly community of the past was charged with the instruction of the nation in God’s commandments, so the people of God today must instruct one another. We are not yet at the point where this is unnecessary because the law of God is fully written in our hearts. Sin still blinds the hearts of believers and the community is needed as a corrective. Discipleship is about teaching one another “to obey everything that [Jesus] has commanded us” (Matt 28:19).

Third, as priests there is worship that is to be offered by the people of God. We are to “declare the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). This is not only a reference to gathered worship. It is a declaration that all of life is to be about worship. In the same way that Paul called the Romans to present their bodies (whole lives) as living sacrifices, the church must take seriously the business of offering all of life to God. Our relationships, our work, our leisure, our resources are all part of what we offer. This is about removing the sacred/secular divide.

Finally, while the church no longer offers sacrifice for sin because Jesus has provided a once for all, we do still have a role in co-operation with the Savior as those who call people to reconciliation with God. Paul said that he was entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). That entails announcing the news that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor 5:19). As his ambassadors, we declare this news and implore people to be reconciled to

God. Evangelism is a priestly as well as a doxological work.

Such actions are part of what it means for the church to begin to fulfill its role as the heir of Israel's calling to be royal priesthood. What the *eschaton* promises is even more exciting as believers fulfill what Adam was intended to be from the beginning. We shall realize our calling as those who reign with God in his new heavens and new earth (Rev 5:10).

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- 1 See John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) for a description and assessment of various approaches to reading the OT.
 - 2 See Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) for his approach.
 - 3 E.g., Robert Altar, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) provide descriptions of this reading strategy.
 - 4 Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 174-6.
 - 5 W. J. Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 85, writes "Verse 4 thus refers to the particular election procedures which have now resulted in the relationship to which vv. 5-6 refer."
 - 6 Walter Kaiser, *Exodus* (EBC, ed., Frank E. Gabelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 415-16.
 - 7 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 330.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 256-7.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 331; cf. Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 263.
 - 10 Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 255-56; cf., Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical Theological Understanding of Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 211-213.
 - 11 G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), 67; cf., Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 67.
 - 12 Kaiser, *Exodus*, 471.
 - 13 Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 144.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 154-5.
 - 15 G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 155-6.
 - 16 Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 159.
 - 17 Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (TOTC; ed. D. J. Wiseman; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), 236.
 - 18 J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* (TOTC; ed. D. J. Wiseman; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 379.
 - 19 Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 166. Hahn summarizes, "To use an architectural metaphor, the whole Levitical economy was a scaffolding erected around the House of Israel in order to repair it. The divine architect was free to use the Levitical priesthood for as long as it took to restore the House of Israel fully to the covenant. Thus in the eschatological age when Israel's idolatry (e.g., the sin of the calf) would be definitely overcome and the hard-hearted sinfulness of the people completely removed (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:25-27), the Levitical economy would no longer be necessary, precisely because it had served its purpose. The scaffolding could be removed, since the house had been repaired: the people would be restored to their original royal priestly primogeniture promised them before they sinned with the calf (Exod 4:22; 19:6).
 - 20 Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 243-4.
 - 21 M. H. Shepherd, Jr., "Priests in the NT," in IDB, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 890.
 - 22 J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969), 91.