

Jesus as Priest in the Gospels

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To the extent that New Testament (NT) theology is concerned to convey the theologies of the NT writings as these have been critically interpreted, the project by nature entails a good deal of interpretative retrieval, that is, an up-to-date recounting of standard arguments and familiar paradigms for understanding the discrete canonical texts. One such “familiar paradigm,” easily demonstrable from the past hundred years or so of scholarly literature, holds that the Epistle to the Hebrews is unique by virtue of its emphasis on Jesus’ priesthood. From here, especially if one prefers to date Hebrews after the destruction of the temple, it is a straightforward move to infer that the concept of Jesus’ priesthood was entirely a post-Easter *theologoumenon*, likely occasioned by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, and almost certainly limited in importance so far as first-century Christian belief was concerned. Whatever factors “in front of” the biblical text may have helped pave the way for this recurring interpretative judgment (here one may think, for example, of the fierce anti-sacerdotal character of so much nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant theology), it almost certainly mistaken. Although I believe a case can be made for a broad interest in Jesus’ priesthood across the NT canon, in this essay I will take up a more focused task by arguing that the authors behind the canonical gospels, as well as the hypothetical hand

behind the equally hypothetical text of Q, were not only convinced of Jesus' priesthood, but also—though to varying degrees—concerned to lace their texts with narrativel arguments along the same lines. By exploring different strands of the gospel tradition, so it is hoped, we will be in position to draw some fresh historical and theological inferences regarding the significance of Jesus' priesthood in early Christianity.

GOSPEL OF MARK

That Mark's gospel is vitally concerned with the theme of temple is now virtually beyond question.¹ The narrative's very plotline bears this out. No sooner does Mark's Jesus submit to his inaugural baptism than he encounters protracted opposition from the temple authorities (Mark 2:1-3:6). This sequence of *Streitgespräche* anticipates Jesus' final week, when he resumes debates with the leading religious stakeholders (Mark 11:27-12:34). The underlying question throughout these conflicts, it seems, is "Who represents God's true temple—Jesus or his adversaries?" Early on in his final week, Mark's Jesus stages a triumphal entry on the model of Solomon, who—in anticipation of Jesus himself, Mark appears to say—rode a donkey *en route* to his own coronation and temple-building project (1 Kgs 1:38). Jesus follows this up with the so-called "cleansing of the temple" (Mark 11:15-19), an act which, together with the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13), presages the destruction of the temple. As far as we can tell, Mark sees the removal of the temple not as an end unto itself but rather as the requisite transition toward a new sacred space, constituted through Jesus' death and resurrection (Mark 15-16) and sealed by the transfer of sacerdotal authority to his disciples (Mark 12:1-12). The evangelist's interest in this cultic conflict, involving two sets of competing claims as to who rightly stewards the divine space, does not relativize the messianic theme but rather gives it fuller definition.

Much of this has already been anticipated by Jesus' programmatic seed parables (Mark 4:1-34). All three of these parables, culminating with an abundant eschatological harvest bound up in the implanted seed, asks to be understood as a symbolic rehearsal of the ancient Jewish hope of a fruitful new Eden. In the scriptures, Eden was the primordial sacred space, maintained by the primordial royal-priest Adam. Accordingly, Mark's

images of eschatological fruitfulness (Mark 4, 11:12–14, 20-25; 12:1-12) hints that through Jesus the people of God are now finally in position to worship in a reprinted sacred space (Isaiah 55, 61). All throughout, Jesus remains the key figure.

If Mark's Jesus is presented as the founder of renewed sacred space, then we should not be surprised by clues that he is also the true high priest. This is not to say that Jesus' priesthood is anywhere explicitly asserted. Rather, in keeping with his overall approach to elaborating Christology, more allusive and parabolic than discursive, Mark's portrayal of a sacerdotal Jesus remains oblique throughout. Such intimations first begin to emerge in the defining baptism scene (Mark 1:9-11). True, while Mark undoubtedly intends the baptism to function as authorization for Jesus' messianic vocation, the heavenly voice's citation of Ps 2:7b ("You are my Son; today I have begotten you") points not just to a royal messiah but also – and perhaps all the more so – a priestly figure tasked with renewing the temple.² This, combined with the same citation's verbal links with Genesis 22, a passage which (for Ancient Judaism) secured Isaac as the foundational sacrificial victim in Judaism's cultus system, implies that Jesus' symbolic anointing through John was in fact no more a royal acclamation than a *priestly consecration*. This is little wonder: cleansing by water was in fact a staple component of priestly ordination (Lev 8:6; Numbers 19) and John's baptism seems to have implied no less.³

Not long after his baptism and subsequent temptation, Jesus encounters a demon-possessed man in the synagogue, crying out: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24). The title "Holy One of God" (*ho hagios tou theou*) is striking, since in the scriptures the "holy one of God" is a title ordinarily reserved for Israel's high priest.⁴ Obviously, the demon is identifying Jesus not with the regnant priest but the eschatological high priest who would one day—so the faithful hoped—destroy the demonic forces.⁵ When the demons first recognize Jesus for who he is, they address him not with a royal title but a priestly title.

One of the exegetical quandaries associated with Mark's cleansing of the leper story (Mark 1:40-45) is Jesus' seeming immunity to cultic impurity. More exactly, whereas one might expect Jesus to have contracted ritual uncleanness after touching the leper, the absence of any note along these lines invites readers to speculate on the possibility that Jesus transcended

cultic contamination—a plausible achievement if he was in fact the human embodiment of sacred space! Jesus’ instructions after the cleansing (“See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them” [Mark 1:44]) are equally telling. Ordinarily, the leper would have had to consult the priest prior to his having been declared clean (Leviticus 13-14). That Jesus essentially skips this step, however, implies that he has taken this priestly judgment on himself. Meanwhile, the cleansed leper is sent off as a witness to—or possibly *against*—the priests (*eis martyria autois*).

In the very next pericope, Mark’s Jesus publicly declares forgiveness for an unnamed paralytic (Mark 2:5). While some interpreters (prompted by the scribes in vv. 6-7) are quick to assume that Jesus’ act of forgiveness identifies him with God, I suspect that Jesus’ hostile observers are vexed not because they perceive Jesus to be drawing a one-to-one correlation between himself and Yahweh but because he is usurping a function normally delegated to the high priest under God’s authority. As far as the Jewish leaders are concerned at that moment, Jesus’ blasphemy consists in his having disrupted the chain of authority set into place by God and operationalized by the high priest. It is also worth considering, as I have done elsewhere, that the paralytic’s mat (the focal point of forgiveness and “carried by four”) is actually meant to function as the antitype of the ark of the covenant (also the focal point of forgiveness and carried by four).⁶ If so, then Jesus’ instructions that the healed paralytic pick up the mat and go “into your house” (*eis ton oikon sou*, my translation [2:11]) may be a kind of reenactment of Solomon’s charge to the priests to bring the ark “into the house” of the newly built temple.

In another conflict scene, Jesus defends his disciples’ Sabbath-day practice of plucking grain by appealing to the example of David who, with the high priest’s consent, partook of bread that was lawful only for the priests (Mark 2:23-28; cf. 1 Samuel 21:1-9). While there are a number of exegetical difficulties in this passage, one might begin sorting through them by noting two virtually incontrovertible points. First, Jesus defends himself by drawing an implicit comparison between himself and his disciples, on one side, and David and his men, on the other. Second, neither the narrative of 1 Samuel 21 nor Mark’s Jesus gives the slightest hint that David’s consumption of sacred bread was somehow transgressive. On the basis of these observations, it

may be argued that David-plus-his-men and Jesus-plus-his-disciples are not temporary exceptions to the cultic stipulation but are fully entitled priests. This much may be gathered from his cultic activities (all performed without a hint of reproach), as well as from Mark 11:35-37, where Jesus' citation of Psalm 110 tacitly affirms himself as the Son of David *qua* priest in the order of the priest-king Melchizedek.⁷ In the light of Mark's fuller narrative, Jesus' mysterious grain field saying now comes into retrospective focus: because priests—unlike the general population—can legally work on the Sabbath, the disciples' work of plucking of grain cannot be considered a violation of the Sabbath, since they, like Jesus himself and because of Jesus himself, are in fact priests.

In the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12), Jesus tells a thinly veiled allegory serving both to denounce the current laborers/priests and to identify new laborers/priests for a newly constituted temple. Meanwhile, though his barely concealed identification with both the "son" (v. 6) and the "cornerstone" (v. 10) of the temple, Jesus positions himself as both the heir of the covenantal promises and the atoning basis for this new temple. In all this, the ordination of a new priesthood would be hardly imaginable unless Jesus' role as "son" also included the right to establish such a priesthood—exactly what one might expect from a royal priest.

In the next scene (Mark 12:13-17), Jesus' opponents attempt to bait Jesus into publicly airing his views on paying taxes to Caesar. In response, Jesus circumspectly weighs in by telling a kind of audio-visual parable revolving around a Roman denarius as a prop. Here, I think, Jesus beckons his audience to draw a contrast between the image and inscription (*epigraphē*) of Caesar with the image and inscription of God (vv. 16-17). In the Roman world, when the populace applied "image" to Caesar, the term spoke (as it does, for example, in the famed Prienne inscription) to the Emperor's role as the mediator between the gods and humanity. Meanwhile, the inscription on the coin set forth the same status in propositional terms. (For example, in Jesus' day, the reverse side of the coins belonging to the Emperor's largest currency issue would have read: "Caesar Augustus Pontifex Maximus," that is, "Caesar Augustus Chief Priest.") Notably, the only other occurrence of "inscription" (*epigraphē*) in Mark's gospel is in reference to the titulus, which declares Jesus "King of the Jews" (Mark 15:26). The two inscriptions are almost satirically juxtaposed, together suggesting that Caesar's so-called

priesthood, symbolized through the idolatrous image and asserted through the blasphemous inscription, was about to meet its match in the crucified Jesus, who is the true image of God and whose own *epigraphē* declares him to be the king of the Jews. Since in Ancient Judaism, the high priest was considered not only an atoning figure but also *the* image of God *ex officio*, the evangelist's carefully constructed contrast speaks for itself: as the crucified image of God, Jesus—and not Caesar—is the true *Pontifex Maximus*.

In Mark's gospel, the climactic revelation of Jesus the high priest comes to fore in his interview with Caiaphas before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:60-65). The connections between this passage and the story's first disputes are unmistakable. If in Mark 2:1-12 the scribes privately speculate that Jesus had committed blasphemy by arrogating to himself the priestly prerogative, now the high priest Caiaphas publicly declares Jesus a blasphemer (Mark 14:64). Whereas in Mark 3:1-6 Jesus poses questions to the temple representatives only to be met with a stony silence, now it is Jesus who responds in silence to his priestly interrogators (Mark 14:61). That the evangelist intends the so-called trial scene as a climax to the disputes of Jesus' final week, while also creating an *inclusio* with the dialogues of Mark 2:1-3:6, is almost certain. Mark's editorial decision is hardly arbitrary, for the interview with Caiaphas is meant to provide closure to the questions raised earlier in the narrative. This occurs, in the final instance, by Jesus informing Caiaphas in the double citation of Mark 14:62 that "you will see" a figure, who is at once the Son of Man and the royal-priestly figure of Psalm 110, coming on the clouds. As has been argued elsewhere, this coming on the clouds is in fact shorthand for the high priest's incense-shrouded entrance into the temple on the Day of Atonement.⁸ True, Jesus does not so much come and say, "I am the eschatological high priest." Instead, Jesus' citation implies that Caiaphas and his colleagues will not live out their time before the true priest accedes to his rightful office. For directly challenging the high priest's authority this way, Jesus indeed makes himself wide open to charges of blasphemy. In turn, by turning Jesus over to the Romans, the ruling council unwittingly ensures that his predicted accession to the high priesthood comes to pass.

From start to finish, the Gospel of Mark is centrally concerned not only with a new community as the new temple, but also with Jesus as the new high priest. Having been anointed for the office through his baptism (Mark 1:13), Mark's Jesus closes out his career in a climactic confrontation with

Caiaphas, a confrontation which would have the effect of sealing Jesus' priesthood. While Markan commentators will regularly talk about the evangelist's presentation of Jesus as a royal Davidic messiah (or something of the sort), in truth the royal aspect takes a backseat to the priestly emphasis. Mark's Jesus is decidedly a *priestly* messiah.

GOSPEL OF JOHN

In recent years, a mounting stack of scholarship has devoted itself to exploring John's coupling of Christology with themes of temple, as these strands have arguably converged in more than a half dozen pericopae.⁹ Here, one need go no further than the Prologue (John 1:1-18), where John's explication of Jesus as the Word occurs within a richly allusive context that ultimately identifies the Word-become-flesh as the new tabernacle (1:14). Or again, whatever the Samaritan Woman's intentions in raising the bitterly contested issue as to whether Jerusalem or Gerizim was the divinely sanctioned cultic space (4:20), her comment is quickly converted into a point of departure for Jesus' predictions of a transcendent temple, one characterized by "worship in spirit and truth" (4:24). Yet perhaps the clearest association between Jesus and temple in the Gospel of John is contained in Jesus' challenge following the temple-cleansing incident (2:13-22): "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19). The temple Jesus has in mind is of course his own resurrected body. Impressed by texts like these (to name just a few), a scholarly consensus shows signs of coalescing on this point: skillfully deploying a range of scriptural images, the author of the Fourth Gospel set out to co-identify the Risen Jesus with the eschatological temple.

While the association between the Johannine Jesus and the eschatological temple does not prove that John also regarded Jesus as a (high) priest, it does make render such a construal plausible, not least on account of the close conceptual connection between sacred space and priests in Jewish antiquity. Like its Ancient Near Eastern neighbors, Ancient Israel correlated the body of the officiating priest, on the one side, and the architecture, accessories and rituals of the temple, on the other. This was a natural move, since the high priest was the human embodiment of the temple, even as the temple encapsulated the cosmos in miniature form. The homologous relationship between the high priest and the temple can be further illuminated against the background of

the iconically-oriented Ancient Near Eastern religions. To be more exact, as Crispin Fletcher-Louis puts, “in Israel’s Temple (and Tabernacle) the role of the cult statue is played by the high priest who is the visible and concrete image of the creator within the Temple-as-microcosm.”¹⁰ Though modern Western thought might perceive only an incidental connection between sacred mediators and their sacred spaces, Ancient Judaism by contrast assumed their virtual reciprocity. For all we know, then, Jesus’ identity as the eschatological temple (an all but established truism in Johannine studies) in the Gospel of John may, for the evangelist’s first readers, may all have all but ensured his also being recognized as eschatological high priesthood.

The surmise is justified soon enough, right in the Gospel’s opening lines, where John identifies Jesus as the Word, linking him to Wisdom. Like Wisdom, Jesus was in God’s presence and that from the beginning; like Wisdom, too, Jesus the Word is at once the source of revelation and a central agent in creation (John 1:1; Prov 8:22-31). When the evangelist goes on to say that the Word “pitched his tent and lived among us” (*eskēnōsen en hēmin*, my own translation) (John 1:14), for at least his well-versed readers, this almost certainly would have brought to mind Sirach 24:

Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
and my Creator chose the place for my tent.
He said, “Make your dwelling in Jacob,
and in Israel receive your inheritance.”
Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me,
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.
In the holy tent I ministered before him,
and so I was established in Zion. (Sirach 24:7-10)

For the author of Sirach, Wisdom’s eternal ministry (“before the ages”) parallels the ministry of the high priest in the Mosaic tabernacle: “in the holy tent I ministered before him” (Sir 24:10). This is to be explained by the assumption that Wisdom was in some sense embodied in the high priest, even she remained the high priest’s chief source of knowledge (Mal 2:7); even as, paradoxically, she is finally locatable in the eternal temple, the prototype of the Mosaic “tent.” As the curator of the eternal temple, Wisdom was, for all intents and purposes, the eschatological high priest behind the

regnant priest.¹¹ On John's terms, then, Jesus' representation as the Word implies his eternal high priesthood.

At the close of the same chapter, Jesus encounters Nathaniel, who receives the high compliment that he is a true Israelite "in whom there is no deceit" (John 1:47). While this by itself might not suggest a point of contrast with the notoriously deceitful Jacob (Gen 25:19-34; 27:1-41), Jesus' enigmatic statement regarding angels "ascending and descending" (*anabainontas kai katabainontas*) on the Son of Man does call up the account of Jacob's dream where angels are also also "ascending and descending" (LXX: *anabainontas kai katabainontas*) on a ladder reaching to heaven (John 1:51; Gen 28:12). The presentation of Nathaniel as a kind of "new and improved" Jacob (and thus as a continuation of true Israel) (John 1:47), together with an implicit equation between Jacob's ladder and the Son of Man, almost forces us to conclude that Genesis 28:10-22 is being brought to bear in order to shed light on Jesus' role as the Son of Man (1:51).

Though ancient Jewish interpreters of Genesis 28 (living around the time of the gospel-writer) seem to have different opinions as to whether Jacob's ladder represented the temple or Jacob himself, I suspect that John adhered to the latter interpretation, only then to see all this pointing forward to Jesus. In John's text, it is virtually beyond doubt that John's mysterious Son of Man, playing the role of the ladder, is to be identified with Jesus. Moreover, when the Samaritan Woman of John 4 dismissively asks whether Jesus could possibly be greater than Jacob (John 4:12), the question is designed to be ironic, underscoring the fact that Jesus *was* in fact greater than Jacob; as the embodiment of Israel, all that Jacob stood for is now fulfilled in Christ. Accordingly, when John's Jesus speaks of angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man (John 1:51), he is setting himself up as the fulfillment of Jacob (notwithstanding the fact that Nathaniel is also the new and greater Jacob), even as he is the fulfillment of Jacob's ladder.

Judging by the relevant targums and rabbinica, it seems that Gen 28:10-22 was primarily interpreted as an aetiology of sacred space. This makes sense especially given Jacob's conclusion on awakening that this "place" was "none other than the house of God" (Gen 28:17). The problem here, however, is that the location of Jacob's dream is not Jerusalem (which we tend to associate with the house of God) but Bethel. In order to mitigate this embarrassing tension, ancient exegetes speculated that Jacob was quite

right, except that “house of God” in this case was not the Jerusalem temple but the eschatological temple. More than that, so this line of interpretation continued, Jacob’s vow to build God a house (Gen 28:22) was not finally rejected (as the non-event of Jacobean temple construction project would seem to imply) but only delayed. As the authors of *Jubilees* and *11QT* (among countless others one suspects) would see it, Jacob will inherit the honor of building the eschatological temple, and then presumably serve as its high priest.¹² John’s point, then, is not simply that Jesus, as the one who would reconstitute Israel around himself, is greater than Jacob. More significantly, Jesus is the true eschatological high priest—the one in whom Jacob’s dream finds its fulfillment, precisely as the Son of Man.

In John 5, Jesus heals a paralytic and soon finds himself persecuted, “because he was doing such things on the Sabbath” (John 5:16). Rising up in his own defense, Jesus insists that his Sabbath work is legitimate because the Father is still working and he too was working (John 5:17). Irrked all the more by this response, the Jews set out to kill Jesus “because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God” (5:18b). Here two observations are in order. First, the Jews perceive Jesus to be claiming divine co-equality but this perception follows not on Jesus’ justification for his Sabbath practices but on his calling God “Father.” Second, though Jesus claims not to be innocent of the charges that the Jews lodged against him, his opposition is not impressed by his defense and remains all the more adamant about his guilt. The Jews are disagreeing, in other words, with the premise that Jesus was doing the work of the Father.

Whatever else is going on in this curious interchange, it is all but certain that Jesus is framing his remarks within what had become a niggling theological conundrum within Ancient Judaism: how was it possible for God to obey the Sabbath without renegeing on his obligation to run the universe? It seems that for most interpreters, the most compelling answer to this question had to do with the argument that divine work was in some sense exempt from Sabbath regulations. By a related logic (not to mention practical exigency), Ancient Judaism also granted priests the right to work on the Sabbath. Thus, there were two kinds of permissible work on any given Sabbath: unobservable work done by God and observable work done by his priests.¹³ Since the Jews patently did not interpret Jesus’ Sabbath defense as an assertion of divinity (though exactly this point was gathered on other

grounds), it can only be the case that the Jews either dismissed his defense as pure nonsense or recognized Jesus' words as staking an implicit claim to share the priestly exemption. In any event, that the Jews continue to charge Jesus with violating the Sabbath, despite his apology, means that they reject Jesus' priestly claim outright.

Shortly before his death, Jesus is anointed by Mary at Bethany (John 12:1-8). While commentators often opine that this anointing with a "messianic anointing" in some non-descript sense, this conclusion has an initial awkwardness about it, not least because according to standard interpretations of Jesus' baptism in the Synoptic tradition, Jesus had already been anointed as messiah at his baptism. To be sure, we cannot rule out the possibility that Mary's anointing was also a kind of messianic anointing without any specifically cultic payload. But since John links this anointing specifically with Jesus' death, it makes far more sense to regard this as a kind of high priestly anointing, akin the oil anointing that the high priests would undergo (Exod 28:41; 29:7, 21, 29; 30:30; 40:13, 15; Lev 7:36; 8:12, 30; 10:17; 21:10; Num 3:3. 35:25; Ps 133:2). As the ensuing plot clarifies, Jesus must undergo such an oil anointing because he is about to enter the atoning space of the unseen temple – through his death.

Having been anointed for the high priestly task, Jesus now extends the priestly prerogative to the disciples through the act of the footwashing in the next chapter (John 13). In Judaism, it was standard protocol for priests to wash their feet before entering sacred space. The sacred space in question is none other than the space surrounding the cross, where, according to John, Jesus will purchase atonement for Israel. In his exaltation to the cross, Jesus reveals the name and glory of the Father, even as the tabernacle revealed the name and glory of Yahweh. That Jesus himself does not require footwashing means that, like the high priest of the Mosaic cult, Jesus needs no one outside of himself for atonement.

As Jesus commences his Farewell Discourse (John 14-17), he alludes to his impending mission, following his death:

In my Father's house (*oikia*) there are many dwelling places (*monai pollai*). If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place (*hetoimasai topon*) for you? And if I go and prepare a place (*etoimasō topon*) for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:2-3)

Here when Jesus talks about preparing “a place,” he likely has the eschatological temple in view. This is demonstrable on at least three lines of evidence. First, earlier in the narrative, when Jesus speaks of his Father’s house (John 2:16), he is ostensibly referring to the temple. So, when John 2:16 is taken together with Jesus’ promises in John 14:2-3, one reasonably surmises that the Father’s house pertains not so much to a brick-and-mortar edifice but, more generally, to Yahweh’s appointed space. Second, if the Jerusalem temple famously had many “rooms” (1 Chron 28:11-12), Jewish expectation held that the eschatological temple to have been at least comparably equipped (Ezek 40:17) – just as we have it in Jesus’ prediction.¹⁴ Third and perhaps most decisively, this reading of John 14:2–3 naturally commends itself by the repetition of “place.” In the scriptures, *the* “place” (LXX: *topos*) is the appointed temple space (Exod 15:17; Deut 12:5, 11; 2 Sam 7:10; 1 Kgs 8:29, 11:36, 14:21; 2 Kgs 21:4, 7; etc.). Likewise in John’s gospel: when the Sanhedrin holds council after the raising of Lazarus, its members express fear that the Romans will remove “*both our place and our nation*” (*kai ton topon kai ton ethnos*) (John 11:48, my translation). Therefore, when Jesus speaks of preparing a place, he is not referring to heaven, but the fulfillment of the Sanhedrin’s “place,” the eschatological temple.¹⁵

While this interpretation of John 14:2-3 is hardly new, I am not aware of any exegesis along these lines that takes this conclusion another step by exploring the implications of Jesus’ role as preparer of the future temple space. While verbs of preparation take a wide range of different objects in the scripture, it is consistently the case that when this language occurs in a cultic context, it involves an act of consecration. For example, in the lead-up to the Sinai theophany, Yahweh instructs Moses to ready the people: “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and *prepare* (LXX: *ginesthe etomoi*; MT *nēkōnīm*) for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (Exod 19:10-11). Similarly, although Solomon “builds” the temple (1 Kgs 6:16), he “prepares” the inner sanctuary (v. 19); the latter area of course would require special consecration as the holding place for the ark of the covenant (cf. 2 Chron 15:1, 3; 2 Chron 1:4). Or again, it is only after the temple has been operationalized (2 Chron 8:12-15), that the Chronicler is prepared to comment: “Thus all the work of Solomon was *prepared* (LXX: *hētoimasthē*;

MT *wattikkōn*) from the day the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid until the house of the Lord was finished completely” (2 Chron 8:16; NRSV adapted). In this context the work of “preparation” must include not only the construction of the temple, but also its culminating consecration. In short, wherever verbs of preparation are used in cultic context, there may be something more than consecration in view, but there is certainly not anything less.

Noting Jesus’ consecratory role is in John 14 important, if only because consecration is typically reserved for the priests. This is true not only of the Ancient Near East in general, but in Israel’s story in particular. In the above examples, the people of Israel are instructed to prepare themselves for a theophany but this is precisely in the context of their ordination as a “kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:4). Likewise, by the time Solomon has prepared his temple, he (like David before him) has already functioned as a priest in numerous regards.¹⁶ On this logic, when Jesus announces his intentions to prepare the eschatological place, he is declaring not only his mission but also his identity as priest. More exactly, John 14:2-3 attests to Jesus as a kind of proleptic priest, whose priesthood will be fully realized on the far side of the cross.

Even so, the boundary line between Jesus’ earthly and post-Easter identities should not be overstated, for the distinction is blurred in John’s Farewell Discourse—both for Jesus and the disciples.¹⁷ So, by the time we come to Jesus’ so-called high priestly prayer in John 17, it is not entirely clear which elements of that prayer have already been perfected and which remain (though described in aorist aspect) to be accomplished. In any case, that John sought to frame Jesus in high priestly terms follows from at least two considerations. First, in offering intercessory prayer of a cosmic scope, Jesus is undertaking a role typically associated with a high priest. Second, twice in this prayer, Jesus refers to the name of God (John 17:11-12). Jesus has received this name from the Father (vv. 11, 12), and expects it to be a source of protection for he disciples (vv. 11, 12). The name which Jesus has received assuredly refers back to Jesus’ recurring self-designation with the phrase “I am” (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5; etc). As both the “I am” of the Exodus (Exod 3:14) and the “I am” of Isaiah’s new Exodus (Isa 42:6, 8; 43:3, 5, 10, 11, 13, 15; 43:25; 44:6,

24; 45:5, 6, 18; 46:4, 9; 48:12, 17; etc.), Jesus has essentially inherited the name of the Father. At the same time, during the Exodus, Yahweh had promised to put the divine name in the pillar cloud, an extension of the divinity that had protected itinerant Israel (Exod 23:21). Since only the high priest bore the name of Yahweh on his person (Exod 28:36-37), and since the high priest alone offered Israel protection by putting Yahweh's name on Yahweh's people (Num 6:22-27), the transaction Jesus describes implicates him as the new high priest.

This brief study has not touched on the full range of literature seeking to make an argument similar to the one made here: namely, an argument for Jesus' priesthood in John.¹⁸ Having briefly examined the gospels of Mark and John, we find that both evangelists assume that Jesus was a kind of high priest, even if—as we might expect—the two gospel-writers had varying levels of interest in making this Christological element explicit.

THE DOUBLE TRADITION AND SONDERGUT: Q, MATTHEW AND LUKE

On examining the so-called Q-source as well as redactional additions in the form of special Matthean and Lukan material, we continue to find indications that Jesus' priesthood was a controlling concept. Such indications sit just below the surface in the familiar passage known as the Beatitudes, beginning with the first makarism (as recorded in Luke): "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). Because for most Bible-readers the Beatitudes are familiar territory, it is all too easy to overlook the possibility that when Jesus blesses his audience, he is assuming the posture of a priest. True, while many commentators will opine that Jesus here is simply describing the felicity of those who will inherit the kingdom, I suggest that this purely "experiential reading" of the Beatitudes fails to do justice either to their eschatological trust (which speaks to an objective redemptive-historical shift in the present) or to the scriptural subtext which the blessings presuppose. Whether we are concerned with the Beatitudes as they occur in Q, Luke, or Matthew, Jesus is depending on a sequence of concepts and terms drawn from Isaiah 61, a passage in which the eschatological high priest announces a Jubilee of restoration. By declaring that the kingdom of God is now available in the here-and-now, Jesus is effecting a kind of speech act by which he not only announces the present fulfillment

of Isaiah 61 in his own person, but also actualizes the very blessings itemized in the same chapter (“binding up” (v. 1), Jubilee (v. 1), “release” (v. 1), “comfort” (v. 2), restoration (v. 3–4) etc.).¹⁹ Moreover, by including the poor as primary stakeholders in the kingdom, Jesus is also – again through the logic of Isaiah – implying that these “poor” are one and the same as the Isaianic poor who will share the messianic herald’s priestly role in the eschaton (Isa 41:17; 58:17; 61:1). According to Isaiah, once such poor are restored the land, they will themselves take on the function of priests (Isa 61:6). Needless to say, Jesus’ invocation of Isaiah 61 through the Beatitudes has significant Christological implications: if the proclamation of Jubilee was a responsibility unique to the high priest (Isa 61:1), the granting of priesthood is no less a high priestly prerogative (Isa 61:6). This holds true for Q, Luke, and Matthew.

For his part, Matthew strengthens the connection with Isaiah by adding Isa 61:1’s term “spirit”: “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*” (Matt 5:3).²⁰ The insertion suggests a heightened interest in Isaiah 61, along with a relatively greater concern to tap its theological potential. In this connection, I suspect it is no accident that Matthew arranges for nine makarisms, in contrast to Luke’s four, and that these are initiated from an elevated space (Matt 5:1) and capped off with a note of joy (Matt 5:12). As any first-century reader would have been aware, if Jesus’ Beatitudes were a declaration that the Jubilee of Isaiah 61 was now being fulfilled, then he was also announcing that this day was the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:9), characterized by a sense of joy.²¹ Thus, when Matthew’s Jesus invites his hearers to rejoice (Matt 5:12), he is inviting them to take up an attitude appropriate to the very day is announcing. Meanwhile, in the pre-70 C.E. era, it was standard practice that on the Day of Atonement the high priests would arrange the building of an scaffold (*duchenen*) from which he would bless the people with the Aaronic blessing (*Sotah* 15b, 38a). The point was for the high priest to be able to bless the people from an elevated position. True, while there are certainly other considerations that compelled Matthew to note Jesus’ position “up the mountain” (Matt 5:1), the topographical note would have also been a wonderfully graphic way of driving home Jesus’ high priesthood. While the Aaronic blessing (Num 6:22-27) contains three elements, Matthew’s Jesus offers a triplicate of threes, as if to claim that Jesus’ priestly blessing both fulfills and outstrips the Aaronic blessing.

Following the lead of Q, Luke also builds on Jesus' priestly identity in the paraenetic materials that follow the Beatitudes. According to Luke's Jesus, the disciples are to "bless those who curse you", as well as "pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:28). They are further instructed: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). The convergence of blessing and forgiveness in Jesus' eschatological ethic is not insignificant, for as E. P. Sanders matter-of-factly summarizes the sacerdotal job description, "the priests blessed the people and asked God for forgiveness."²² The point is this: those who claim the kingdom as their own must prove that kingdom membership by executing a priestly office. The very conferral of such an office would have been virtually inconceivable apart from the presupposition of Jesus' own priesthood. In this respect, Q and Luke are on the same Christological page.

Famously, Luke closes out his gospel right where he begins it: within a cultic setting. In the opening chapter, Luke's readers meet Zechariah as he encounters Gabriel in the Holy Place. Soon thereafter the lost little boy Jesus scolds his parents for not realizing that he must be at temple, busy with his Father's things (Luke 2:49). By gospel's end, Jesus' priestly identity is unmistakable:

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 25:50-53).

After leading his disciples to Bethany, significantly, the "house of God," the Risen Jesus reenacts a transaction familiar from the temple grounds. Yet now, Luke implies, the temple space has been extended; the temple personnel has been reconfigured around the person of Jesus. That Jesus should carry out a blessing immediately before ascending to heaven also suggests that he will continue to carry out his priestly role in the heavens, much as the writer of Hebrews strives to argue.²³

Though brief, this survey of relevant texts from Q, Matthew, and Luke reveal that all three texts reflect some consciousness of Jesus as high priest. Given the very nature of Q, it would be extremely difficult to prove a "narrative

logic” that would show that the so-called Q community had a strident interest in this point. At the very least, so far as Q is concerned, Jesus’ priesthood was a matter of assumption. Meanwhile, both Matthew and Luke reflect a keen interest in developing the notion.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined various pericopae from five different strands of the gospel tradition (Mark, John, Q, Matthew, and Luke) with a view to teasing out intimations of Jesus’ priesthood, either as an unstated premise or as a christological assertion in its own right. This examination does not pretend to be comprehensive either in scope or in depth. Much more has been said elsewhere and could be said, either toward advancing further examples or toward offering a more holistic assessment of each author’s handling of the theme. All the same, this review is not without its own pay-offs. First, given traces of sacerdotal Christology in such diverse witnesses as the Mark, John (who may or may not have been familiar with the synoptic tradition), Q (a putative source independent of Mark), Luke, and Matthew, it follows that Jesus’ high priesthood was no sectarian hobby-horse but was widely embraced in the broader Christian milieu. Second, the notion seems to have reached back to the earliest stages of the church. While the dating of the Gospel of Mark remains *sub judice*, his Christological thematization certainly depends, at least in part, on early pre-Markan materials. Furthermore, if we accept the possibility of Q, then we must also acknowledge it as one of the earliest Christian “texts” on record. That Q reflects a theological commitment to Jesus’ priesthood (not to mention the fact that this commitment is re-articulated by Matthew and Luke) suggests an early and sustained trajectory. On the likelihood that at least some of the gospel traditions examined in this essay trace their origins to the historical Jesus himself (an argument I make more extensively elsewhere), we conclude that Jesus’ priesthood was no post-Easter construct but remained core to the identity of the historical Jesus himself.²⁴ Widespread and early, the notion of Jesus’ priesthood goes well beyond and arises well before the Epistle of Hebrews.

If nothing else, such findings call for a little disciplinary self-reflection. NT studies has relegated Jesus’ priesthood to the cellblock of theological obscurities for far too long—and this error needs atoning. It is high time we

declare Jesus the priest's release and make right our debts for any theological distortions incurred. Just what distortions these might be is a separate but nonetheless crucial question.

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- 1 See, e.g., Donald Juel, *Messiah and Temple: The Trial of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (SBLDS 31; Missoula, Mont: Scholars Press, 1977); Emilio G. Chávez, *The Theological Significance of Jesus' Temple Action in Mark's Gospel* (Toronto Studies in Theology 87; Lewiston: Mellen, 2002); Timothy C. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark: A Study in Its Narrative Role* (WUNT 2.242; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).
 - 2 This is certainly the case when it comes to contemporary texts (4Q174 and *Psalms of Solomon* 17) that also draw on Psalm 2; see my *Jesus the Priest* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; London: SCPK, 2018), 71–73. On the “problem” of David’s priestly role, see Carl E. Armerding (1975), “Were David’s Sons Really Priests,” in G. F. Hawthorne (ed), *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C Tenney Presented by His Former Students* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975): 75–86; Gordon J. Wenham, “Were David’s Sons Priests,” *ZAW* 87 (1975): 79–82; Karl Deenick, “Priest and King or Priest-King in 1 Samuel 2:35,” *WTJ* 73 (2011): 325–39; Daniel S. Diffey, “David and the Fulfilment of 1 Samuel 2:35: Faithful Priest, Sure House, and a Man after God’s Own Heart,” *EvQ* 85 (2013): 99–104.
 - 3 See Robert L. Webb, “Jesus’ Baptism by John: Its Historicity and Significance,” in Darrel L. Bock and Robert L. Webb (eds), *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Content and Coherence* (WUNT 247; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2009): 95–150 (116).
 - 4 As far as I know, this observation was first registered by Gerhard Friedrich, “Beobachtungen zur messianischen Hohepreistererwartung in den Synoptikern.” *ZTK* 53 (1956): 256–311 (275–8).
 - 5 See, e.g., *T. Levi* 18.12; *T. Dan* 5.10–11. For other references in the primary literature, see Craig A. Evans, “Inaugurating the Kingdom of God and Defeating the Kingdom of Satan.” *BBR* 15 (2005): 49–75.
 - 6 Jesus the Priest, 187; on four ark bearers, see 1 Kgs 8:1–6; Ezek 1:5.
 - 7 David performs sacrifices (2 Sam 6:13, 17), wears the ephod (2 Sam 6:14), sets up the tabernacle (2 Sam 6:17, and blesses the people (2 Sam 6:18) – distinctively priestly activities (Exod 28:4; Num 3:6–8; 4:1–33, 47; 6:22–27).
 - 8 Above all see, Crispin Fletcher-Louis, “The High Priest as Divine Mediator in the Hebrew Bible : Dan 7:13 as a Test Case,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1997 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press: 1997): 161–93 (166–72). Also see André LaCocque, *The Book of Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 124–25; Perrin, *Jesus the Priest*, 174–78.
 - 9 James McCaffrey, *The House with Many Rooms: The Temple Theme of Jn. 14, 2–3* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988); Johannes Frühwald-König, *Tempel und Kult: Ein Beitrag zur Christologie des Johannesvangeliums* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1998); Mark Kinzer, “Temple Christology in the Gospel of John,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1998 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press: 1998): 447–64; Judith Lieu, “Temple and Synagogue in John,” *NTS* 45 (1999): 51–69; Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2001); Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus’ Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (JSNTSup 220; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Stephen T. Um, *The Theme of Temple Christology in John’s Gospel* (LNTS 312; London/New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006); Paul M. Hoskins, *Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Temple in the Gospel of John* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006); Margaret Barker, *King of the Jews: Temple Theology in John’s Gospel* (London: SPCK, 2014); Huub Welzen, “The Transformation of the Temple in the Fourth Gospel.” *HvTSt* 72 (2016): 1–8.
 - 10 “God’s Image, His Cosmic Temple and the High Priest: Towards a Theological and Historical Account of the Incarnation,” in Alexander T. Desmond and Simon J. Gathercole (eds), *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004) 81–99 (89, emphasis original). See also G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 17; Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 81–121.
 - 11 The equation of Wisdom with the Word, and both of these with the High Priest is discernible, for example, in Philo, *Somm.* 1.215; *Fug.* 108; *Leg.* 1.65.
 - 12 *Jub.* 32.16–24; *11QTa* 29.9–10. I develop this point in *Jesus the Priest*, 213–18.

- ¹³ For references, see M. H. Burer, *Divine Sabbath Work* (BBRSup 5; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns) 30–34.
- ¹⁴ See Coloe, *Temple Symbolism*, 160–62; Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Temple* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; London: SPCK, 2010), 54–55.
- ¹⁵ See also Kerr, *Jesus' Body*, 303–06.
- ¹⁶ See J. A. Davies, (2011), "'Discerning between Good and Evil': Solomon as a New Adam in 1 Kings," *WTJ* 73 (2011): 39–57.
- ¹⁷ On this whole discussion, see Kerr, *Jesus' Body*, 314–70.
- ¹⁸ See e.g. John Paul Heil, "Jesus as the Unique High Priest in the Gospel of John," *CBQ* 57 (1995): 729–45; Wally V. Cirafesi, "The Priestly Portrait of Jesus in the Gospel of John in the Light of *1QS*, *1QSa* and *1Qsb*," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 8 (2011): 83–105.
- ¹⁹ This is also the point of Q 7:22//Luke 7:22//Matt 11:4–5.
- ²⁰ The addition is regularly see as redactional, having been inspired by Isaiah 61; see, e.g., Robert A. Guelich "The Matthean Beatitudes: 'Entrance-Requirements' or Eschatological Blessings?" *JBL* 95 (1976): 415–34 (427–31); Martin Hengel, "Zur matthäischen Bergpredigt und ihrem jüdischen Hintergrund," *TRu* 52 (1987): 327–400 (351–53).
- ²¹ As *m. Ta'an.* 4.8 has it, "there were no happier fast days for Israel than the fifteenth of Ab and Yom Kippur."
- ²² *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 203.
- ²³ See Andrews George Mekkattukunnel, *The Priestly Blessing of the Risen Christ: An Exegetico-Theological Analysis of Luke 24, 50–53* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).
- ²⁴ See my *Jesus the Priest*.