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# Jesus Our Priest

*A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ*

Gerald O'Collins, SJ  
& Michael Keenan Jones



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GERALD O'COLLINS, SJ,  
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## Preface

Ecumenical dialogues between Christian churches and debates within some of those churches have kept alive issues about priesthood: the priesthood of all the faithful (or of all the baptized) and the priesthood of ordained ministers (or ministerial priesthood). All agree that the priesthood of the faithful and ministerial priesthood are closely interrelated. But do they differ in essence and not merely in degree? Through their ordination have the presiding ministers received a special gift for the benefit of the community and so stand in a special relationship to Christ the High Priest? Do that gift and relationship distinguish them from the faithful and from the priesthood received through baptism?

By virtue of their baptism all Christians share in the priesthood of Christ. But does this participation differ from the participation in the priesthood of Christ received through ministerial ordination, so that—for instance—only a validly ordained priest can bring into being the sacrament of the Eucharist? Does ministerial ordination effect such an essential difference?

Any adequate response to these questions depends on a theological understanding of the priesthood of Christ himself. Logically, before tackling any issues concerned with the priesthood of the faithful and the priesthood of the ordained, we need to have reached some clearly worked out conclusions about what is implied by calling Christ a priest or the High Priest of the new covenant (the Letter to the Hebrews).

Perhaps surprisingly, little reflection on Christ's own priesthood is available from modern works in Christology and soteriology. Let us cite three examples. In the closing chapter of *Jesus the Christ* (German original 1974) Walter Kasper briefly examines the 'triple office' of Jesus as priest, prophet (teacher), and king (pastor), and allows less than three pages for a consideration of his priesthood. In *Jesus: God and Man* (German original 1964) and the Christological section of the second volume of *Systematic Theology* (German original 1988) Wolfhart Pannenberg briefly and critically discusses the 'triple office'

of Christ. He denies that we should speak of the earthly Jesus as priest and king or even of his being 'a prophet in the strict sense'. In *Jesus: Symbol of God* (1999) Roger Haight, while ready to talk about Jesus' prophetic role and about his kingly role (at least as 'Saviour' and 'Liberator'), has nothing to say about his priestly function and identity.

If we turn to such landmark documents as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), published in 1982 by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, and the *Final Report*, published in the same year by the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), we find that they excavate common principles about Christ's priesthood. But they do not say why these principles are true and how they reached such conclusions. Their interest is focused elsewhere: on the ordained ministry and the celebration of the Eucharist.

We can group the convergent statements about Christ's priesthood from BEM and ARCIC under ten points. He is (1) the unique priest or high priest (2) of the new covenant, whose (3) once-and-for-all (4) sacrifice (5) for all human beings (6) brought salvation or reconciliation to the world. (7) His priesthood continues through his interceding 'before the Father', by (8) the incorporation into him of the baptized, and by (9) the celebration of the Eucharist, where Christ 'unites' his people and 'gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church' (BEM) or 'presides and gives himself sacramentally' (*Final Report*). (10) All other priesthood, whether the priesthood of all the faithful or that of the ordained ministry, is derived from Christ's priesthood.

Although neither document quotes the Letter to the Hebrews or even refers to it, that New Testament text, as we shall see, clearly lies behind points (1) to (7). All of these points call for analysis. Why did Christians apply the language of priesthood to Christ, and in what did they believe his unique priesthood consisted (1)? Can we dive deeper into their language of salvation for all human kind and the expiation of their sins and say more about what his priesthood effected in bringing about a new covenant (2, 5, and 6)? What does the language of sacrifice mean and how can it be justified and maintained (4)? What more did New Testament Christians and their successors maintain, in the light of Hebrews, about a permanent priesthood of Christ (7)?

Both *BEM* and the *Final Report* point to a priesthood of Christ exercised through baptism and the Eucharist (8 and 9). How could they ground such a belief about his priesthood continuing in these sacraments? Does the Letter to the Hebrews allow for a sharing in Christ's priesthood (10)? Is such a participation ruled out by the epistle's emphasis on the once-and-for-all character of his priesthood (3)?

In short, *BEM* and the *Final Report* provide us with a grid of questions that should be raised and explored in the course of this book. Further questions will emerge: when did Christ become a priest? At the incarnation or only at the final sacrifice of his life? Then there are two closely correlated questions: did Christ's priesthood depend essentially on his humanity? Is the priesthood of Christ (and Christian priesthood in any form) a priesthood that will, or even must, be tried and tested by temptations and sufferings?

Then there are questions connected with Christ's 'triple office', championed by John Calvin and John Henry Newman. How might we relate Christ's being priest with his being also prophet (teacher) and king (pastor)? Should we recognize his earthly ministry as an expression not only of his prophetic and kingly function but also of his priestly function? How do baptized and ordained Christians share in Christ's triple office?

Our opening chapter will set out some relevant material on the Jewish priesthood and some aspects of Christ's priesthood to be gleaned from the Gospels. Chapter 2 will present data from Paul's letters (especially 1 Corinthians and Romans), 1 Peter, and the Book of Revelation. Two chapters will then be dedicated to the teaching of Hebrews on Christ's priesthood and the issues it brings up. Chapter 5 will examine what Origen, Cyprian of Carthage, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, and some other fathers of the Church offer for those who explore the theme of Christ's priesthood.

Chapter 6 will move to what Thomas Aquinas might yield for this theme, before taking up, in Chapter 7, the controversies about the unique priesthood of Christ initiated by the Reformers (in particular, by Luther and Calvin). Chapter 8 will state the positions defended and elaborated by the Roman Catholic response at the Council of Trent, and will gather some reflections on Christ's priesthood from Pierre de Bérulle, Charles de Condren, and other exponents of the 'French



School'. Chapter 9 will retrieve what John Henry Newman, Karl Barth, and others in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have contributed towards appreciating Christ's 'triple office' and, in particular, his priestly function.

After gathering relevant data from the Scriptures and a range of Christian witnesses, we will be in a position, through two concluding chapters, (1) to describe and define in twelve theses the key characteristics of the priesthood of Christ, and (2) to set out (also in twelve theses) what sharing in that priesthood through baptism and ordination involves.

We are most grateful to many people for their help and encouragement in writing this book and, in particular, to Bishop John Barres, Gerald Bednar, Finbarr Clancy, Robert Draper, James Dunn, Abbot Hugh Gilbert, Mary Grey, Michael Hayes, George Hunsinger, Allan Laubenthal, Brendan Leahy, Philip Moller, Doan Nguyen Kim, Anne Marie Paine, John Ringley, Lawrence Terrien, Anthony Towey, and Jared Wicks. Our warm thanks go to Vicky Rowley (Heythrop College, University of London), who was tireless in tracing and providing on loan books we needed. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from other languages are our own. With much affection we dedicate this work to the staff and members of St Lawrence's Parish, Huntington, Connecticut.

*Gerald O'Collins, SJ, and the Revd Michael Jones*  
16 June 2009

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## Abbreviations

AA	Vatican II, <i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i>
ABD	D. N. Freedman (ed.), <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
ARCIC	Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission
BEM	Faith and Order Commission, <i>Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry</i> (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982)
DzH	H. Denzinger and P. Hünermann (eds.), <i>Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum</i> (17 <sup>th</sup> edn., Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1991)
LG	Vatican II, <i>Lumen Gentium</i>
LThK	W. Kasper <i>et al.</i> (eds.), <i>Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche</i> , 11 vols. (3 <sup>rd</sup> edn., Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1993–2001)
LW	J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (eds.), <i>Luther's Works</i> , 55 vols. (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House/Muhlenberg Press, 1958–67)
LXX	Septuagint
ND	J. Neuner and J. Dupuis (eds.), <i>The Christian Faith</i> (7 <sup>th</sup> edn., Bangalore and New York: Theological Publications in India/Alba House, 2001)
ODCC	F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (eds.), <i>The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
par./parr.	parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , ed. J. P. Migne (162 vols., Paris, 1857–66)
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J. P. Migne (221 vols., Paris, 1844–64)
PO	Vatican II, <i>Presbyterorum Ordinis</i>
SC	Vatican II, <i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i>
STh.	St Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i>
TRE	H. Krause and G. Müller (eds.), <i>Theologische Realenzyklopädie</i> , 36 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977–2004)

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## The Jewish Matrix and the Gospels

Unquestionably, the Letter to the Hebrews (written between 60 and 90 AD) is *the* central New Testament text on the priesthood of Christ and his sacrificial activity. Nevertheless, before examining its witness at length, we need first to take up some strands of teaching in other books of the New Testament and to retrieve something of the Jewish matrix. Hebrews presents Christ's high priesthood against the background of the Jewish priesthood and sacrificial system. Hence we begin with Jewish priests and sacrifices.<sup>1</sup>

### JEWISH MATRIX

Abraham and the other patriarchs build altars (e.g. Gen. 12: 7–8; 22: 13) and offer sacrifices (e.g. Gen. 15: 9–11).<sup>2</sup> Even earlier in the narrative of Genesis, Noah, when the flood subsides, builds 'an altar to the Lord' and makes on it 'burnt offerings' of 'clean' animals and birds.

<sup>1</sup> On Jewish priesthood see M. D. Rehm, 'Levites and Priests', *ABD* iv. 297–310; H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. L. G. Perdue, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 52–66; on Jewish sacrifices see *ibid.* 238–45. On priesthood in general see H. Haag *et al.*, 'Priester. Priestertum', *LThK* viii. cols. 557–70; W. Klein *et al.*, 'Priester, Priestertum', *TRE* xxvii. 379–434.

<sup>2</sup> We are well aware that the place of the Book of Genesis at the beginning of the Bible does not mean that it was composed before the books that follow in the canon. Moreover, the final text of Genesis and other individual books frequently include a variety of traditions that should, or at least can, be dated to various periods. The canonical order does not represent the chronological order of composition of the books of the Old and New Testament, and not even the order of composition of sections within these books.

When ‘the Lord smells the pleasing odour’, he ‘says in his heart’ that, despite ‘the evil inclination of the human heart’, he will never again curse the ground and bring destruction (Gen. 8: 15–22). In building an altar and offering this sacrifice of thanksgiving, Noah does so spontaneously and, obviously, without intending to follow prescriptions about burnt offerings and other offerings understood to have been introduced later by God through Moses (Lev. 1–7).

In the course of the patriarchal narratives, the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek introduces something startlingly different as regards priestly activity. This priest-king abruptly appears to meet and bless Abraham in the name of ‘God Most High (*El Elyon*)’ (Gen. 14: 19–20). Like Abraham and Sarah, Melchizedek enjoys intimate contact with God. A priest of a Canaanite sanctuary, he conveys a blessing to Abraham and does so in the name of the deity whom he worships and who is at once identified as ‘the maker of heaven and earth’ (Gen. 14: 22). Later books will identify ‘God Most High’ as the Lord (YHWH) or God of Israel (Num. 24: 16; Ps. 46: 4). The brief but startling story of the meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek will be exploited by the Letter to the Hebrews and subsequent Christian tradition.

When we move to the period of the monarchy, we find kings being anointed (e.g. 1 Sam. 9: 16; 10: 1; 16: 12–13; 2 Sam. 2: 4, 7; Ps. 2: 2, 7), even as priests were to be anointed.<sup>3</sup> The new king bore the dignity of priesthood (Ps. 110: 4). At times the king performed some cultic and priestly function (as Solomon did at the dedication of the Temple: 1 Kgs 8: 1–65). During that period there was not yet a ‘single priesthood with proper jurisdictional authority’;<sup>4</sup> it was only progressively that ‘the priests became the only ones who may “draw near” to God at the altar and serve him’ (e.g. Lev. 21: 17; Num. 18: 7).<sup>5</sup>

Early priestly activity involved (1) protecting and caring for various sanctuaries (e.g. Bethel) and the Temple in Jerusalem, when Jerusalem as the home of the Temple became the only sanctuary,<sup>6</sup> and

<sup>3</sup> Priests were anointed (e.g. Exod. 29: 7; Lev. 8: 10). The only reference to prophets being anointed comes in Isa. 61: 1–2; see Ps. 105: 15. Elijah was supposed to anoint his successor Elisha (1 Kgs 19: 16), but *pace* Sir. 48: 8 did not do so.

<sup>4</sup> Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, ii. 55.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 56.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 214–24.

(2) instructing people in YHWH's law, as well as blessing people in his name (Deut. 10: 8). Worshippers approached priests to enquire about the divine will, receive oracles, and apply God's revelation to their lives. The opening of Jeremiah's fourth personal lament names 'instruction' as a distinguishing (but not exclusive) feature of the priesthood (Jer. 18: 18). Deuteronomy 'places the priest's role with regard to instructing in the divine law above the sacrificial practice'.<sup>7</sup>

But after the return from exile in Babylon, offering sacrifice gained significance as the primary priestly activity. Even if the Old Testament never provides 'a rationale for sacrifice or a general theory of sacrifice', three kinds of sacrifice (communion sacrifices, sacrifices that were gifts, and sacrifices for sin) became central to the work of priests.<sup>8</sup> They functioned, above all, to lead worship and offer sacrifices. Their privileged vocation involved special access to God: in particular, contact with the altar, the sign of God's numinous presence (Lev. 1-7; 16). Even so, a post-exilic prophet like Malachi, who clearly took a high view of priestly responsibilities, showed deep respect for the 'instruction' (on the Law) priests should impart: 'the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts' (Mal. 2: 7). True 'instruction', mentioned four times, runs like an antiphon through this passage on the duties of priests (Mal. 2: 4-9). Somewhat later, Sirach, in the course of glorifying Aaron (Sir. 45: 6-25) and with an eye on the high priests of Sirach's own time, does not fail to mention Aaron's authority to teach the law (Sir. 45: 17).

Werner Dommershausen sums up the teaching and cultic functions of the priesthood: 'The various priestly duties share the common basis of mediation: in oracles and instruction, the priest represents God to the people; in sacrifice and intercession, he represents the people to God.'<sup>9</sup> In other words, priestly mediation runs in two directions: from God to the people and from the people to God.

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 18. See also Lev. 10: 10-11 and the priests' role in teaching 'the statutes which the Lord has uttered through Moses'.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 238.

<sup>9</sup> W. Dommershausen, 'kohen, priest', in G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H. J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. D. E. Green, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 66-75, at 70.

St Athanasius of Alexandria, with the Letter to the Hebrews in mind, was to express this two-directional mediatorial work of priesthood as follows: 'He [Christ] became Mediator between God and human beings in order that he might minister the things of God to us and our things to God' (*Contra Arianos*, 4. 6).

After the fall of the monarchy and the return from exile, priests came to the forefront of Jewish life. As the priesthood became more structured and more central to Jewish existence, priestly lineage became essential. Priests belonged to the tribe of Levi and descended from the particular family of Aaron (Aaronites). Aaron himself was deemed to be the first 'high priest' (Ezra 7: 1–5), of royal rank and vestments (Exod. 28–9), and a prophet (Exod. 7: 1–2) who served as the 'mouth' of Moses in transmitting his word (Exod. 4: 14–17): in short, a priest, king, and prophet.

In the post-exilic period we meet for the first time someone who genuinely bore the title of high priest, Joshua (Hag. 1: 1, 12, 14; 2: 2, 4). The high priest 'functioned as the necessary mediator between God and people, for he entered the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement and carried out his cultic rites dealing with sin (Leviticus 16)'.<sup>10</sup> The anointing (Exod. 29: 4–7; Lev. 8: 6–12) and clothing (Exod. 28: 1–29: 9) of the high priest 'continued part of the royal tradition'.<sup>11</sup> As a kind of substitute for the Davidic king, the high priest emerged as a priest-king, but not as a priest, king, *and prophet* (unlike Aaron; see above). Yet John 11: 49–52 pictures Caiaphas, the high priest, as unwittingly expressing a prophecy about the death of Jesus (see below).

At times some Old Testament prophets denounced corrupt priests: for instance, over their drunkenness (Isa. 28: 7) and their murderous plans (Jer. 26: 7–11). Amos recorded a dramatic confrontation between the prophet and the official priest of the royal sanctuary at Bethel (Amos 7: 10–17). Amos warned that the Lord did not delight in religious festivals and sacrifices but in the practice of justice and righteousness (Amos 5: 21–7). Prophets regularly levelled explicit or implicit criticism at empty worship and the way priests and people relied on superficial ritual performance and did not live righteous lives (e.g. Isa. 1: 11–17). In a verse that summed up his message, Hosea declared in

<sup>10</sup> Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, ii. 56.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 66.

the name of the Lord: 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hos. 6: 6; Matt. cites this verse when portraying Jesus' ministry to sinners: 9: 13; see 12: 7).

Tobit emphasizes the value of almsgiving as 'an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High' (Tob. 4: 7–11). Sirach declares that those who keep the commandments, return kindnesses, and give alms offer acceptable sacrifices to God (Sir. 35: 1–4). The Psalms praise prayer and a 'contrite heart' as sacrifices pleasing to God (Ps. 51: 17; 141: 2). A psalm of judgment on Israel acknowledges that the people have brought God abundant sacrifices, but this is not what God wants. God desires thanksgiving and prayer (Ps. 50: 8–15). In a closing warning the psalmist states on behalf of God: 'those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honour me' (Ps. 50: 23).

Nevertheless, emphasis on right conduct towards God and human beings and denunciations of those who obey the cultic prescriptions of the Law while neglecting its moral commandments does not mean demanding that the sacrificial activity of priests be abolished. In an exchange with Jesus over the greatest commandment, a scribe rightly gives precedence to the practice of love over burnt offerings and other sacrifices (Mark 12: 33). But the exchange does not call for the abolition of the sacrificial system, as we shall see at once in a passage from Isaiah about non-Israelites.

Some strikingly universalist texts about foreign people to whom divine salvation is extended and who join themselves to Israel picture the Temple as being open to all people and Gentiles (seemingly proselytes) being authorized to serve in the Temple and join in its priestly worship. YHWH declares: 'their holocausts and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples' (Isa. 56: 6–7). God even intends to select some persons from among the Gentile nations and make them serve in the Temple as 'priests and levites' (Isa. 66: 18, 21)—an expression typical of Israel but now applied to non-Israelites.<sup>12</sup> To make some 'outsiders'

<sup>12</sup> For other cases of theological expressions typical of Israel being applied by Old Testament prophets to non-Israelites, see W. Gross, 'YHWH und die Religionen der Nicht-Israeliten', *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 169 (1989), 34–44, at 35. Another (more limited) interpretation is possible here: God intends to select for Temple duty some of the exiled Israelites whom the nations will bring home to Jerusalem.



priests and levites to serve in the Temple alongside the Israelite priests and levites would be a radical departure from the prescriptions of Numbers; it limits the exercise of priesthood to the descendants of Aaron (Num. 4: 1–29; 8: 1–26; 18: 1–23).

Before and after the Babylonian exile, the institution of kingship stirred various hopes; at times a ‘messianic’ (anointed) deliverer was expected as a king. In the post-exilic situation the fourth night vision of the prophet Zechariah is shaped by an expectation that salvation was near (Zech. 4: 1–5, 10b–14). This hope was vested in two ‘messiahs’ or anointed ones: Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the political ruler descended from David. Yet, despite the attention devoted to the rebuilding of the Temple and the growing importance of the high priest, who was to become a substitute for the Davidic king, there was little expectation of a Messiah-priest.

There is some evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the Qumran community, (which, as a whole, was credited with a priestly character), expected two figures, ‘Messiahs of Aaron and Israel.’<sup>13</sup> The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (a Jewish document from the second century BC), announces in the *Testament of Levi* (no. 18) the coming of one figure, a wonderful priest-king: ‘Then shall the Lord raise up a new priest, to whom all the words of the Lord will be revealed . . . in his priesthood the nations . . . shall be illumined by the grace of the Lord. In his priesthood sin shall cease . . . and he will grant to the saints to eat of the tree of life.’<sup>14</sup> But this priest-king (like the ‘Messiah of David’ and the ‘Messiah of Aaron’) is not portrayed as a priestly figure who will bring deliverance from sin and salvation through his own self-sacrificing death.

Let us sum up some major features of the Levitical priesthood and, with an eye on the Letter to the Hebrews, set out the points of continuity and discontinuity between this priesthood and that of Christ the high priest. (1) In both cases priesthood comes by divine

<sup>13</sup> G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973), 136–7; on priesthood according to Qumran documents see Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 35–63.

<sup>14</sup> H. C. Kee (trans. and ed.), in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 794–5. Some sections of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* have been reworked later by Christians, but this does not appear to be the case in no. 18 of the *Testament of Levi*.

appointment. Priests are chosen by God and not self-appointed. YHWH elected priests (and levites) to serve as his instruments for the benefit of the chosen people (Exod. 25–30, 39–40; Lev. 8–9; Num. 1–10). Jesus also received a divine mandate to serve as high priest of the new covenant. (2) In both cases the divine purpose for priesthood is to bring about the sanctification (through ritual worship) and the instruction of God's people. Priests have both cultic and teaching functions. (3) As the defining and supreme act of worship, sacrifice is *the* specifically priestly function for the Levitical priests and for Jesus. The Letter to the Hebrews, as we shall show, is quite clear about that, even if it firmly contrasts the repeated sacrifices of the Levitical priests with the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ. (4) Exercising priesthood did not exclude kingly and prophetic functions, and vice versa. Ezekiel, while ministering as a priest to his fellow exiles, was called around 593 BC to exercise also a prophetic role (Ezek. 1: 1–3). The prophet Elijah, in a contest on Mount Carmel with some priests of Baal, offered a sacrifice that the Lord accepted in dramatic fashion (1 Kgs 18: 17–40). At the time of Jesus the high priest exercised an office that was also kingly. That Jesus was not only a priest (or rather the High Priest) but also king and prophet enjoyed at least partial precedents. A priestly figure could also be a prophet and/or a king.<sup>15</sup>

Five points of discontinuity can be briefly singled out here. (1) Unlike the Levitical priests, Christ did not inherit priesthood through descent from Aaron. Human lineage was not the grounds for his being a high priest 'according to the order of Melchizedek'. (2) Jesus offered his sacrifice once and for all, unlike the yearly and daily sacrifices required from the Jewish priests. (3) Furthermore, he went through his self-sacrifice for the benefit of all people. To be sure, Second Isaiah (see above) associates sacrificial activity in Jerusalem with the universal

<sup>15</sup> See also Miriam, a 'prophet' who was associated with the priesthood of her brother Aaron (Exod. 15: 20–1) and led the women in the Song of Miriam, an ancient thanksgiving for what God had done in rescuing the people from the slavery of Egypt. Miriam and Aaron are also remembered as having challenged the prophetic/kingly authority of Moses (Num. 12: 1–16). For another example of a dual role, see Deborah, a prophet and (kingly) judge, who was responsible for Barak's victory over Sisera (Judg. 4: 1–5: 31).

benevolence of God.<sup>16</sup> But the death and resurrection of Jesus, along with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, brought redemption to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. (4) By the time of Jesus the cultic activity of the Jewish priesthood had long been confined to one sanctuary, the Temple in Jerusalem. The locale for Jesus' self-sacrifice, however, was no holy sanctuary but a profane place outside the city: a site for crucifixion (Heb. 13: 12–13). (5) Finally, there was something inherently 'conservative' about the Levitical priests. They thought and acted within the framework of an existing order. In exercising his priesthood Jesus aimed at transformation, not mere continuation. His sacrifice initiated a new covenant between God and all human beings.

#### THE GOSPELS ON OTHER PRIESTS

Concerning priesthood there is much to glean from the Gospels that can illuminate, directly or indirectly, the priesthood of Christ. We begin with Luke's Gospel. In this Gospel the first person to appear is 'a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah', the eighth of the twenty-four priestly orders (1 Chron. 24: 10). His wife also enjoyed a priestly background, as she was descended from Aaron. Luke opens with the story of the birth of their son, whose life and activity would prove to be prophetic, rather than priestly.

When Zechariah exercises his priestly role by entering the sanctuary to offer incense, while the whole assembly of the people is praying outside, he receives a vision of an angel of the Lord who announces the conception and birth of John the Baptist. Zechariah hesitates to believe this good news, and is struck dumb (Luke 1: 8–20) until his son is born. In the very next chapter the angel Gabriel announces to Mary the conception of Jesus, and she obediently accepts the message (Luke 1: 26–38). Thus Luke sets up a vivid contrast: the priest is reluctant to believe but the girl is willing to do so. Divine manifesta-

<sup>16</sup> See further G. O'Collins, *Salvation For All: God's Other Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42–8.

tions and their reception are by no means limited to priests serving in the Lord's sanctuary in Jerusalem but can extend to a young girl in a minor village.

The opening chapters of Luke tell of Mary and Joseph, after the birth of Jesus, presenting him in the Temple and offering the prescribed sacrifices. The Christ Child was welcomed, not by priests, but by a devout old man (Simeon) and a prophet (the even older Anna), who expressed their faith in him as Saviour, Messiah, and universal Lord (Luke 2: 22–38). Luke adds a story about the 12-year-old Jesus remaining behind in Jerusalem and being found in the Temple engaged in dialogue with 'the teachers', experts in the Jewish religion but not necessarily priests (Luke 2: 41–51).

When the ministry of Jesus begins, Luke follows Mark (1: 40–5) by telling the story of the healing of a leper. Jesus orders the man: 'Go and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing' (Luke 5: 12–14; see also 17: 14–15). Luke and Mark appreciate the respect that Jesus manifests for the role of priest in making judgements about cases of leprosy (Lev. 13–15).<sup>17</sup>

Yet, as far as the Jewish priesthood is concerned, Luke's Gospel contains shadows along with lights. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29–37), a priest (representing the highest religious leadership among the Jews) and a levite (a lay associate of priests) do not help a wounded traveller. It is left to a foreigner, a Samaritan who would be expected to be hostile to Jews, to take generous care of the traveller in distress. The priest and the levite may have been like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*: not malicious *per se* but preoccupied or, as that text so succinctly states, 'late for an important date'. Or, as many commentators suggest, the priest and levite fail to look closely, think the man lying on the side of the road is already dead, and do not want to incur ritual impurity by coming in contact with a corpse.

Among a group in the Temple who challenge Jesus about his authority, some were 'chief priests' (Luke 20: 1–8 parr.). The same

<sup>17</sup> In an authentic saying Jesus takes for granted the practice of sacrifice in the Temple: 'when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift' (Matt. 5: 23–4).

group ('the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes') features in the first prediction that Jesus makes about his passion, death, and resurrection (Luke 9: 22 par.). In the third passion prediction Luke does not specify those who will hand Jesus over to the Gentiles (18: 20), while Mark names 'the chief priests and the scribes' as those who will do so (10: 33).

As Luke tells the passion story, before the Last Supper Judas confers with 'the chief priests and officers of the temple police' (22: 4) about betraying Jesus. After being arrested Jesus is taken to the house of the (unnamed) high priest (22: 54). The chief priests then play a major role in condemning Jesus, handing him over to Pilate, and securing his execution (22: 66; 23: 4, 13–25). In Mark's passion narrative the chief priests likewise figure prominently (14: 1, 10, 43, 53, 55; 15: 1, 3, 10–11). Without providing his name, Mark highlights the decisive role of the high priest (Caiaphas) (14: 53–4, 60–4). In this passion story the chief priests, along with the scribes, mock Jesus on the cross (15: 31–2).

Matthew adds his own sombre notes in telling how the priests rejected Jesus and were responsible for his death. When Judas repented and 'brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders', he threw the money not into the Temple (*hieron*) where all the faithful could attend but 'into the sanctuary (*naos*)', to which only priests, the guardians of the sanctuary, had access.<sup>18</sup> They refuse to put the money into the treasury of the Temple; 'they use it to buy a field, thus inscribing their crime on the soil of Israel'<sup>19</sup> (Matt. 27: 3–10). After the death and burial of Jesus, the chief priests (together with 'the Pharisees') set a guard at the tomb of Jesus and make it 'secure' by sealing the stone. After the

<sup>18</sup> When Matthew writes of 'the curtain of the *naos* being torn in two' at the moment of Jesus' death (27: 51; see Mark 15: 38), he apparently refers, not to the Temple in general, but to the Holy of Holies and the inner veil that separated this sanctuary from the holy place. See D. M. Gurtner, *The Torn Veil: Matthew's Exposition of the Death of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Matthew and Mark seemingly understand the rending of the curtain to mean that the death of Jesus has opened up access for all to the Holy of Holies. Previously only the high priest could enter this inner sanctuary and do so only once a year (on the Day of Expiation).

<sup>19</sup> A. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, trans. B. Orchard (Petersham, Mass.: St Bede's Publications, 1986), 10.

resurrection, the guards tell the chief priests ‘everything that had happened’. Thereupon the priests (together now with ‘the elders’) bribe the soldiers to spread a story that the disciples of Jesus had stolen the body (Matt. 27: 62–6; 28: 11–15).

John’s Gospel discredits the hereditary, Temple-centred, religious authorities. They present a collective obstacle to accepting Jesus in faith (9: 22–3). They are mercenary and uncaring shepherds (10: 12–13), and are more concerned with worldly acclaim than the divine favour (12: 43). When the term ‘the Jews’ (used sixty-nine times by John) refers to those who have an unbelieving or hostile attitude towards Jesus, it refers primarily to the religious authorities: the leading priests involved in the passion story (11: 47; 12: 10; 18: 3; 19: 15, 21) and, in particular, the high priest Caiaphas, who is now named (11: 49–50) and his father-in-law Annas (18: 13, 24).

Nevertheless, with ‘paradoxical boldness’ (or with brilliant irony?), John presents the high priest as clinching the debate about killing Jesus with words that express simultaneously ‘a criminal human calculation and a divine plan of redemption’.<sup>20</sup> What Caiaphas says enjoys a prophetic value rooted in the priestly nature of his office: ‘it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed’. As John comments, these words reveal a central truth: Jesus was about to die for the sake of and on behalf of the people, and that people would include not only Israel but also all the scattered children of God (John 11: 49–52). The plan of Caiaphas to do away with Jesus had unwittingly set in motion a ‘universal plan of salvation to produce one people of God’.<sup>21</sup>

John and the other three Gospels all present the Jewish priesthood and its leadership as directly responsible for Jesus’ death. That may well be one of the reasons why early Christians avoided calling their own leaders ‘priests’ and named them ‘apostles’, ‘evangelists’, ‘prophets’, and, above all, ‘overseers (*episcopoi*)’, ‘presbyters’ or elders, and ‘deacons’. In our closing chapter we will return to the terminology used for official ministers in early Christianity.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>21</sup> A. T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to John* (London: Continuum, 2005), 330 1.

When the Letter to the Hebrews reflected at length on Jesus' suffering and death, it took up terms that were notorious among Christians of that time ('priest' and 'high priest') and reworked these notions, and, in particular, despite the memory of Caiaphas, it reworked the notion of high priest. Hebrews mentions the crucifixion of Jesus, but never indicates who was responsible for it (Caiaphas, Pilate, or anyone else). It hints at the abuse Jesus endured during his crucifixion (Heb. 13: 13). Yet it portrays the priesthood and, in particular, the high priest in the light of institutions described in the Pentateuch and not in terms of any contemporary figures. It never levels any criticism against specific Jewish priests of the first century, but presents in general the ineffective nature of Jewish sacrifices, which needed to be repeated on a daily or a yearly basis and offered also for the sins of the priests themselves.

### THE GOSPELS ON JESUS AS KING AND PROPHET

Not being of the tribe of Levi, Jesus was never called a priest, nor did he ever call himself a priest. That did not stop the author of Hebrews from giving him that title. Yet some writers would deny him that title and even challenge his entire 'triple office'. Thus, Wolfhart Pannenberg declares: 'the historical Jesus . . . was neither priest nor king nor, in the strict sense, prophet.'<sup>22</sup> This blanket denial cries out to be softened, not least because—as we shall see—'priest', 'prophet', and 'king' are used with flexibility. They are analogical, not strictly univocal, terms.

First of all, by his words and actions Jesus claimed, at least implicitly, some kind of *kingly authority*—a claim rejected by the Jewish and Roman authorities. Pontius Pilate had Jesus crucified on the charge of falsely and dangerously pretending to be 'the King of the Jews' (Mark 15: 26 parr.). John's Gospel elaborates the inscription

<sup>22</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 445; for a brief discussion of the 'triple office' of Jesus, see *ibid.* 443–8. Years earlier Pannenberg had already challenged the triple office assigned to Jesus: *Jesus: God and Man*, trans. L. L. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 212–25.

fixed to the cross: 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews' (19: 19–20).<sup>23</sup> John also has Pilate questioning Jesus at length over his kingship (18: 33–7), and presenting Jesus 'in the mock insignia of royalty—a crown of thorns and a purple robe' (19: 5).<sup>24</sup> The final exchange between Pilate and the chief priests turns on Jesus' claim to kingship (19: 4–16). Those who play down the historical reliability of the Fourth Gospel explain (or explain away?) this association of Jesus with kingship as mere Johannine theology.

Yet one must reckon with what Mark (along with Matthew and Luke) reports about Jesus as king: (1) the Palm Sunday episode when Jesus dramatized his role as the expected royal figure of Davidic descent by entering Jerusalem in a kingly fashion to restore the fortunes of Israel, and whose action was understood by friends and foes to claim royal authority (Mark 11: 1–10 parr.); (2) Jesus' mysterious language about himself as the Son of David who would be enthroned at God's right hand (Mark 12: 35–7 parr.); (3) Jesus' answer to the high priest about being not only the Messiah and the Son of God but also the Son of Man who will be seated at the right hand of God and will come 'with the clouds of heaven' at the climax of history to gather in the elect (Mark 14: 61–2 parr.); (4) Pilate's question, 'are you the King of the Jews?' (Mark 15: 2 parr.); and (5) the scene in which, after his scourging, Jesus was mocked by the soldiers as 'King of the Jews' (Mark 15: 17–20 par.). Is there nothing that is historically reliable in all this?

One could cite further evidence from the Gospels to establish that the historical Jesus in some sense affirmed his kingly authority, which was accepted by some (e.g. Mark 8: 29) and rejected by others (most significantly by the chief priests). Those who refuse to identify the historical Jesus as king may have succumbed to the notion that one size (of being king) fits all. Kingship has assumed many forms, and not least in the history of Israel and of the whole Middle East.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> On the historicity and meaning of the inscription, see Lincoln, *The Gospel According to John*, 474–5. For the versions in all four Gospels, see J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 1193–4.

<sup>24</sup> Lincoln, *The Gospel According to John*, 458. Lincoln adds at once: 'For the evangelist, of course, despite all appearances, the one who is on trial actually is the true King of the Jews.'

<sup>25</sup> See K. W. Whitelam, 'King and Kingship', *ABD* iv. 40–8.



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