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**The priest in the Old Testament –
some biblical reflections on the priest**

In the world of the Old Testament text, the priest is one of four principal mediators between God and God's people. The four mediators, each defined by their function in society, are: priest, king, sage and prophet.¹ Each one has a particular role in mediating God's presence in the life of a people called to be priest, king, sage and prophet at the service of the nations who do not yet know God. Whereas the king and the prophet are central characters in the often dramatic events that mark the history of salvation, the priest and the sage are central respectively in regular routine, worship and wisdom in day to day life in the world.² The realm of the priest in the Old Testament is the Temple and there activity is focused on worship and its peak expression in the sacrificial cult. I will focus here uniquely on the priest and his role as presented in some Old Testament texts (particularly in the Pentateuch) in order to sketch out in broad strokes his portrait.

I will seek to examine two parallel priestly realities in the Old Testament. The first derives from the world of the text itself in which the figure of the priest fulfills an essential mediating role. This is particularly striking in the Pentateuch where much of the Law focuses on the function of the priest in the life of a people called to be "a kingdom of priests" and "a holy people" (Ex 19:6). However, other books in the Old Testament also emphasize the priestly role, for example 1 and 2Chronicles, Ezra and Ezekiel. The second reality derives not from the world of the text but from the world of the producers of the text. Historical-critical Biblical exegesis has maintained that a priestly school of writers (often codified as P) had a very important role in redacting certain parts of the Old Testament and in codifying what became the Pentateuch. The fact that the Book of

¹ It is interesting to point out that each of these four mediating figures is central to one of each of the four parts of the Christian division of the Old Testament (as distinct from the three part Jewish TaNaKh) – the priest in the Pentateuch, the king in the History Books, the sage in Wisdom Books and the prophet in the Prophetic Books.

² Often overlooked, it is the sage, in the division of labor among the mediators of God's presence, who is focused on meditating on creation in day to day life, observing the created order that derives from an invisible God and pointing to his presence.

Leviticus constitutes the center of the Pentateuch is one consequence of the prominence of this role.

In the following article these two realities: the presence of the priest in the world of the text and the presence of a priestly writer/s among the producers of the Old Testament, will be integrated.

1. A priestly theology of holiness

A key term for understanding the role of the priest in the Old Testament is "holiness". The refrain in Leviticus is "You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy" (cf. Lev 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:26). God is holy and the priest is made holy (consecrated) for his service: "Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate (make holy) them so that they may serve me as priests" (Ex 29:1, cf. 40:13-15).

What is holiness? The word "holy" is far from conceptually clear as W. Brueggemann has commented:

The term has such rich and varied usage precisely because it seeks to articulate what is most characteristic and therefore most hidden and inscrutable about God.³

God is totally other in the priestly conception, wholly separate from the world that he has created and the human person who seeks to worship him. Holiness is godliness, the quality that is consistent with God. However, it is this quality that the human person, although totally separate from God, is called to emulate. According to the priestly conception, holiness is incompatible not only with sin (intentional or unintentional contravention of God's will) but also with uncleanness (states of embodied being (including certain physical disorders) that suggest the imperfection of the human world). Categories of holiness and cleanliness often seem to conflict with modern consciousness that resists the seemingly arbitrary character of dividing nature into categories of holy/common or clean/unclean. Yet, the vocation of the Old Testament priest depends on just such acts of separation.

³ W. BRUEGGEMANN, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville, Jon Knox Press, 2003), 67.

The priest's function is described in detail in Leviticus, a book that has many commandments and almost no narrative. God speaks directly to Aaron, the proto-priest, explaining the role of the priest:

You are to distinguish between the holy (קודש) and the common (חול), and between the unclean (טמא) and the clean (טהור); and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses (Lev 10:10-11).⁴

The two verbs used here are essential to understand the role of the priests in forming a holy people for a holy God: to distinguish and to teach. The verb translated as "to distinguish" by the NRSV is in Hebrew (הבדיל), which is often translated as "to separate". It refers here to making a clear distinction between the holy and the common and the clean and the unclean. G. Wenham explains:

Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean. Clean things become holy when they are sanctified.⁵

The role of the priest is thus to make clear distinctions: to sanctify what can become holy and to know what cannot become holy. The priest must then also become the teacher of holiness. The verb in Hebrew (הורו) "to teach" is derived from the same root as the Hebrew word Torah (תורה), which refers to the entire teaching or law of Moses.

Historical-critical research as it has developed in the past three centuries has outlined the identity of a priestly contributor to the writings of the Old Testament, particularly within what make up the Pentateuch.⁶ The priestly writings are to be found in parts of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Without entering into the complex question of authorship, the canonical center of the Pentateuch (probably redacted itself by the priestly school) is the Book of Leviticus, supreme expression of a priestly perspective, and the texts that precede it in the Book of Exodus (25-31 and 35-40) that describe the construction of the Tent of Meeting. This same research has also revealed the priestly contours of the first text in the Bible (Gen 1:1-2:4a), attributed to P. This initial and foundational text provides us

⁴ It is significant that in the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet rages against the priests because they have betrayed exactly this vocation: "Its priests have done violence to my teachings and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean..." (22:26).

⁵ G. WENHAM, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 19.

⁶ The Priest source seems to have its source in the second half of the sixth century and later when the exiles returning to the land under Persian rule were restoring the Temple in Jerusalem and its sacred cult.

with an important introduction to the priestly role in the Bible. In P's Creation narrative, the startling expression "image and likeness" (צלם ודמות) to describe the human's relationship to God is introduced.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness (בצלמנו כדמותנו); and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen 1:26-27).

The expression is all the more surprising in the light of the Priestly conception of a God totally other in his holiness. This is a strikingly visual representation of the priestly insistence that the human person is to be "holy" as God is "holy". What is described here is the very imprint of the *imitatio Dei* that the human is called to take on as a life project. The created order is imprinted with the divine will of the Creator; however the Creator God speaks to the human person, making his will explicit in the commandment – a verbal enunciation of his will. The five imperatives given to the human person in the first creation account: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it and rule the creatures (Gen 1:28) constitute a program that empowers the human person. This is often (undoubtedly correctly) understood as a presentation of the human person as viceroy of the one, true king. However, here I would like to suggest that the Holy God is also forming "a kingdom of priests and a holy people" who will maintain creation in its holy state by filling the earth with God's image and likeness.⁷ The divine act of commanding is central in the first part of the Old Testament, known as the Torah. This Torah, probably edited by a priestly elite in the Persian period, emphasizes the central sanctification role of the priest in the holiness program for Israel.

Before arriving at a notion of a priestly elite, the canonical narrative within the Pentateuch presents a series of receding circles of priesthood. Adam and his descendants the sons of Adam constitute a first extensive circle that comprises all humanity with the mission to make holy. The human person in Gen 1 might be conceived of as the priest of creation. S/he is separated from the rest of the creatures by being created in the image and likeness

⁷ Within this context, one might understand the sin of the people of Babel. They construct a city and a tower lest they "be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:4), thus refusing to fill the earth. The Church's first Pentecost (cf. Ac 2:1-11) is the opposite movement, setting out to fill the earth with the holiness of God's image and likeness in Jesus.

of the Creator, blessed with a unique series of commandments that express the divine will and then introduced into the reality of holiness through the Sabbath day. The first use of the verb "to make holy" (שָׁדַק) is not for a material object but for time, the Sabbath. The Sabbath is then a Temple in time that precedes the Temple in space.⁸ In fact, for Adam the priest, all of creation is a space in which to construct the Temple in time. The sanctification (making holy) of the Sabbath helps us to understand the nature of a separation between "holy" and "common".⁹ The six days of the week are not "bad" or "sinful" but the Sabbath day is a conductor to God, a channel of blessing that facilitates God's sharing of his life with the human person despite the abyss of otherness. Sabbath rest is profound communion across unbridgeable difference. Sabbath constitutes the epicenter of the Torah and more specifically the priestly writings. In the Book of Leviticus, the repeated admonition "to keep my Sabbaths" (Lev 19:3, 19:30, 26:2) is matched with the terrible consequences of not keeping the Sabbaths in the menaces that come at the end of the book (Lev 26:34, 26:43).¹⁰

The Sabbath is not only the first object of the verb "to make holy" in the Old Testament: "So God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it" (Gen 2:3), it is also the pinnacle of creation, when the human person is in the perfect "image" and "likeness" of God in the act of "rest". The Sabbath is separated from the common days of the week as a day in which the human person might "rest" from work, the imitation of a God Creator who can be free from what he has created. God is not bound by the work of his hands, he can stand back and separate himself from it; the human person is called to emulate him, taking a break from the work of his/her hands in order to commune with the one Creator.

Two dimensions of the Sabbath are revealed in the two versions of the Ten Commandments in the Pentateuch (cf. Ex 20:1-17, Dt 5:6-21).¹¹ The first version of the

⁸ The concept of the architecture of holiness" in time rather than in space was developed by the renowned Jewish thinker, A.J. HESCHEL, *The Sabbath: Its meaning for modern man* (New York, Farrar, 1952).

⁹ It is noteworthy that even when God commands the construction of a holy place, the Tent of Meeting (in Ex 25-31), the commandments for construction of the place end with the overriding commandment to observe the Sabbath. Likewise, when Moses repeats these commandments to the people of Israel (Ex 35-40), he begins the foundation and principle, the Sabbath.

¹⁰ This is also the perspective of the Book of Ezekiel, where in the castigation of the priests who do not distinguish between holy and common, clean and unclean, cited above, the prophet then says: "and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them" (Ez 22:26).

¹¹ The narrative logic for this repetition is that the first time the Commandments are given is when the people is at Sinai after the Exodus from Egypt and hear these words from God. The second time is forty years later,

Sabbath commandment obligates remembering the Sabbath day and keeping it holy because "in six days, the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day" (Ex 20:11). Here, the Sabbath is a distinct time to live the *imitatio Dei* to which the human person is called. Sabbath is the day for holiness. However, the second version of the Sabbath commandment obligates observing the Sabbath day and keeping it holy because of the need to remember "that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Dt 5:15). Here, the Sabbath is a distinct time to remember the experience of slavery and, at least once a week, to ensure that no person is slave but rather that all, master and slave, man and woman, Jew and Gentile, enjoy the Sabbath rest, because all are created in the image and likeness of God.¹² Sabbath is also the day for egalitarian ethics.

Thus, within the Torah of commandments that are given for holiness, the concern is not uniquely with ritually based cleanliness that enables communion with a holy God but also with justice in human relations, as the Sabbath commandment shows. The commandments combine the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with neighbor. The intertwining of the two can be clearly seen in chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus, where the ritual and the ethical form a seamless garment. Holiness must be lived out in both its horizontal and vertical dimensions because God has created the human person in his image and likeness, this being not only a call to holiness in relationship to God but to justice in relationship with all other human persons.

The sons of Adam are excluded from the "kingdom of priests" because of sin even though among them is a first explicitly priestly figure, Enosh son of Seth in whose lifetime "people began to evoke the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26).¹³ Noah's descendants are likewise excluded because of sin that culminates in the building of Babel, city and tower, despite Noah's priestly acts on entering the ark (discerning among clean and unclean species, Gen 7:2) and on exiting the ark (building an altar and making sacrifice, Gen 8:20). This

when the wilderness generation has perished and the new generation, about to enter the land, is being taught the Law by Moses.

¹² The echo with the Pauline egalitarian ethic of life in Christ is deliberate (cf. Gal 3:28).

¹³ The Hebrew word translated "evoke" here (קרא) shares the same root as the first word in Hebrew in the Book of Leviticus which also gives the name to the book in Hebrew (ויקרא).

increasingly receding priesthood leads to the election of Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel. The priestly vocation of Israel is explicitly enunciated at Sinai:

You shall be for me a kingdom of priests¹⁴ (ממלכת כוהנים) and a holy¹⁵ nation (גוי קדוש) (Ex 19:6)

However the birth of Israel in the Exodus-Sinai event does not stabilize the circle of priesthood. It recedes further when the people of Israel celebrate the Golden Calf in Moses' absence on the mountain at Sinai. Moses finds allies for the frightening return of holiness in the tribe of Levi. The Levites wrought terrible vengeance on idolatrous Israel, massacring the people as they went from gate to gate killing son, brother, friend and neighbor. Moses said to them then:

Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so you have brought a blessing on yourselves this day (Ex 32:29).

The circle of holiness recedes even further at Shittim, in the Wilderness, when Israel worships the Baal of Peor in a festival of pagan orgiastic cult, seduced by the women of Moab/Midian.¹⁶ Here it is Pinchas, grandson of Aaron the priest, who wreaks God's vengeance, imposing holiness and God, then says of him:

(He) has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf... therefore... I hereby grant him my covenant of peace... a covenant of perpetual priesthood (ברית כהונה (עולם), because he was zealous for his God and made atonement (ויכפר) for the Israelites (Num 25:11-13).

The ever receding circle of holiness is directly correlated to the betrayal of holiness of those called to be holy, a tragic reality in the story told in the Pentateuch. However, the priest, instituted to worship and instruct in holiness, must also make atonement for an imperfect people.

The fulfillment of the vocation to be holy as God is holy depends on a strict distinction between things that open up the channel of blessing that God seeks to impart to his children and the things that either do not open up the channel (common and unclean) or indeed

¹⁴ The word "priest" (כהן) is used previously in the Bible for priests outside of Israel: Melchizedek, the mysterious priestly figure who encounters Abraham (Gen 14:18) and the priests in Egypt (Gen 41:45.50, 46:20, 47:22.26).

¹⁵ This is the first time that this adjective is used in the Bible.

¹⁶ The confusion between Midianites and Moabites is a well known feature of the text.

obstruct it (sin). The priest must be clear as to what can be made holy (common things that can be sanctified) and what can not be made holy (unclean things). Uncleanness is not the source of danger (it is not endowed with magical destructive power) but it is contagious and must be contained. The danger derives from mixing categories and confusing them. Ultimately, as a priestly vicar of God, the priest is authorized, according to the holy rites ordained by God, to make holy those things that can be made holy and to contain those that cannot and to know the difference between the two. Thus, as mediator of holiness, the priest has two main roles:

- He must prepare the people to be vessels of God's holiness for all, celebrating the rites of holiness and teaching them to distinguish between holy and common and clean and unclean.
- He must preside at rites of atonement, ordained by God, for the uncleanness and sins of the people so that whatever uncleanness has been accumulated and whatever sins have been committed might be washed away and a new start can be made on the path to holiness. Brueggemann points out that the priestly texts are astonishing because they claim that God "has granted Israel a reliable, authorized device whereby Israel can be restored to full relationship with the Lord".¹⁷

2. A priestly theology of order

The careful distinction between holy and common, clean and unclean makes the priest the preeminent person of order. Order and chaos are important themes in the Bible. The Creator God has in his wisdom created an ordered world, the order of which guarantees its continued existence in harmony and peace. The Bible begins with the priestly text that describes the seven days of God's creation of the world, focusing on the progressive domination of *tohu vavohu*¹⁸, a primordial chaos, by divinely ordained order initiated by God's word. The human person is custodian of this divine order. Chaos threatens this world as a constant menace that surges out to engulf creation and reduce it to *tohu vavohu*.

¹⁷ W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997) 666.

¹⁸ Difficult to translate, the term is constituted by two words which each refer to an environment that is inhospitable to human existence, wasteland, emptiness and wilderness.

The term *tohu vavohu* appears only twice in the Old Testament. The first time it describes the primordial "nothingness" that precedes God's creative activity (Gen 1:2), the NRSV translates the term "formless void":

The earth was a *formless void* (תהו ובהו) and darkness covered the face of the deep (Gen 1:2a)

The only other time the term is used it describes the chaos into which the world is plunged because of the human person's wrong choices that contradict the divine will (Jer 4:23), the NRSV translates the term "waste and void".

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void (תהו ובהו); and to the heavens, and they had no light (Jer 4:23).

Whereas order guarantees life in a fertile land that knows peace, chaos leads to a barren wasteland ravaged by war that is synonymous with death. Creation and de-creation serve here as important moments in the life of God with human beings.¹⁹ Creation is God-ordained order and de-creation the consequence of the human choice of chaos.²⁰ Within the Bible, the priest serves as the representative of God's order *par excellence*.

The priestly text of the Book of Leviticus ends with the blessings and the curses that are consequences of the acceptance or rejection of God's Word. God enunciates the blessings that devolve from the putting into practice of the Torah as follows:

I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit (...) And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; (...) I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect²¹ (Lev 26:4.6.11-13).

Whereas the curses that devolve from the rejection of God's Word are described as follows:

I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down by your enemies; your foes shall rule over you, and you shall flee though no one pursues you (...) Your strength shall be spent to no purpose: your

¹⁹ The third moment is of course the moment of re-creation, God's grace that expresses his fidelity despite human sinfulness. This moment is the return from the Exile of death, a resurrection.

²⁰ This rings out loud and clear in the texts that bring the Pentateuch to a close (Dt 27-34), cf. Dt 30:15-20.

²¹ This word in Hebrew (קוממיות) is translated in the NRSV as "erect". It is interesting to note here that this word in Greek (παρρησια) is the term used by Luke to describe the community after it received the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost (Ac 2:1-11). There it is usually translated "boldly" (cf. Ac 2:29, 4:13.29.31, 28:31).

land shall not yield its produce, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit (...) You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters (...) I will devastate the land, so that your enemies who come to settle in it shall be appalled at it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste (Lev 26:17.20.29.32-33).²²

The priest in the Bible is the legitimator, enactor and guarantor²³ of order. The role of the priest is to underline the centrality of worship as the locus for an affirmation of divine order in the face of invasive chaos in the life of the people of God. Just as the cosmos passed from chaos to order by the command of the Creator God, so the Biblical Israelite passes from chaos to order as he or she enters the liturgical space where the acts of worship are enacted. Just as God commanded order for creation, separating the elements, distinguishing one from another; so too the priest within cultic worship engages in a series of actions whereby the faithful receive the assurance of an ordered life. This order evokes the peace and harmony promised by God through the act of creation; the priest gives visible expression to this order within worship. A world that rages against God's order (the world not only of darkness, sin and death but a world that experiences a constant invasion of chaotic uncleanness) finds its counterpoint in the ordered and rhythmized moments of cultic worship. Brueggemann masterfully comments:

While the temptation to a dualism that divides "life" from "worship" is real, it is important to see that worship models and enacts an alternative world of sanity that prevents Israel from succumbing to the seductive insanities of a world raging against the holiness of (the Lord) the Creator. The priesthood is to protect and guarantee the maintenance of this alternative world wherein Israel could "see" God and see itself differently in the world.²⁴

The historical-critical insistence on the priestly identity of the writer of Genesis 1 has borne out the insight of the ancient commentators that the creation of the world finds its echo in the priestly texts about the construction of the Tent of Meeting (or Tent of Witness in the

²² Leviticus presents this desolation as a "Sabbath" (cf. 26:34-35), a consequence of a sinful people not scrupulously observing the sabbaths of the Lord.

²³ These three terms are derived from the fascinating discussion of the mediating role of the cult in the life of Ancient Israel in W. BRUEGGMANN, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997) 650-679.

²⁴ W. BRUEGGMANN, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 665.

ancient Greek translation²⁵), a subject that takes up most of the second part of the Book of Exodus (chapters 25 to 31 and 35-40).²⁶ Thus, in the preparatory acts for worship, the human person becomes co-creator with God, fulfilling his role as vicar of God on earth, constructing a space for the intimate encounter between God and the human person. When the Tent is completed, it becomes, by the supreme grace of God, his dwelling place in the midst of the people:

Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle (Ex 40:34).

According to Exodus, Israel has been brought out of slavery (עבדות 'avdut) in order to engage in worship (עבודה 'avoda), these two words sharing a common root. In fact, much of the struggle for liberation is focused on the necessity of clearly distinguishing between an earthly tyrant, Pharaoh, who serves as a grotesque parody of the divine²⁷, and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Creator of heaven and earth, who is enthroned in the Tent at the center of Israel's life at the end of Exodus.

The commandments for the construction of the Tent are given twice in Exodus, first God speaks to Moses (Ex 25-31) and then Moses speaks to the people (Ex 35-40), a mediation of the Word that is a sad reminder of Israel's refusal to stand face to face with God at Sinai (cf. Ex 20:18-21). The repeated commandments remind the reader that mediation between God and human is not so much desired by God as imposed by the limits of human nature. The parallels between God's acts of creating heavens and earth, a cosmos given as place for life with God, and the commandments to construct the Tent, a microcosm for life with God that must serve to restore creation to God, are numerous but I will suggest only three such evocative parallels here:

- When God concludes the acts of creation, it is said: "And on the seventh day, God finished the work that he had done" (Gen 2:2). The use of the Hebrew verb "finish" (כלה) with the word "work" (מלאכה) is used only three other times in the entire Old Testament, each time referring to the place of cultic worship. At the end of Exodus, when the Tent is completed, it is written that "Moses finished the work" (Ex 40:33).

²⁵ The Masoretic (Hebrew vocalized) text and the Septuagint understand differently the term that defines the tent. The Hebrew has a term that is translated "meeting" whilst the Greek has understood a different term that is translated "witness."

²⁶ One of the most ancient commentators to suggest a parallel between the creation of the world and the building of the Tent of Meeting is Flavius Josephus; see his *Antiquities of the Jews* 3:180-187.

²⁷ The plagues provoked by Pharaoh's increasingly hardened heart are an expression of the world plunged back into an ominous *tohu vavohu*.

Likewise in 1Kings 7:40 and in the parallel text in 2Chr 4:11, when the Temple in Jerusalem is completed, it is written that "Hiram finished all the work that he did for King Solomon".²⁸ The expression "to finish work (ויכל מלאכה) can be seen then to refer to the completion of a space where holiness will be enacted. The microcosm (Tent/Temple as ordained by God as the center of Israel's priestly life) is not neatly separated from the world but rather sensitizes the worshipper to the ultimate vocation of the world as macrocosm (Creation is desired by God as the space for holy living).

- Another striking parallel between Creation and Tent is that both serve as arenas for human activity, driven by the divine Word that commands holiness as the aim of human life. Creation is brought to its completion by the placing of the human person in its midst and s/he is called to act in the place of God. The Tent too, presented as the place where God dwells, is indeed the place where the human person encounters the God that dwells there. The preparatory rites that precede entrance into the Tent (including the rites of purification, ordination of the priests, etc.) and the cultic rites in the Tent are preparation for going forth from the Tent into the world as emissaries of God's holiness. This will become supremely evident in the prophetic critique of the cult when the rites of holiness do not result in holy living and are then judged as utterly worthless (for example Is 1:10-17, Am 8:1-6). This movement from Tent to world is structurally present in the Book of Leviticus that moves from a first part (1-16) focused on the rites around the Tent, to the second part (17-26) that focuses on holy living in the whole Land of Israel.²⁹ Rites in the Tent prepare for holy living in the world.
- A further parallel between the creation account at the beginning of the Bible and the commandments to construct the Tent in Exodus is that the final stage of both

²⁸ It is striking that here the expression is attributed to Hiram, King of Tyre, Solomon's technical advisor, and not to Solomon himself as Hiram is a foreign king – technically a Gentile. Wisdom is an attribute of the Gentiles whereas revealed Law is an attribute of Israel. Hiram's parallel in the Exodus account is Bezalel, the master craftsman, who is filled by God "divine spirit, with ability, intelligence and knowledge" (Ex 31:3). Hiram and Bezalel serve as sages skilled in transforming the elements of the cosmos into components of the holy microcosm, in which the priests will enact the sacred rites. Holiness and wisdom, priest and sage, must be closely allied if each is to fulfill its ultimate purpose.

²⁹ Historical-critical exegetes distinguish between a P source and an H (Holiness) source respectively for these two parts of Leviticus. J. Milgrom has commented: "H's main distinction from P is that P restricts holiness to the sanctified persons (priests) and places (sanctuaries) whereas H extends holiness to both its aspects, to persons the entire people of Israel, and to places, the entire promised land," *Leviticus 17-22* (New York, Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2000), 1397.

creation and the giving of the commandments for construction is the Sabbath.³⁰ Space gives way to time in both texts, holy place to holy time. Making space for God in time, withdrawing from a world of activity, interiorizes what might remain uniquely exterior with a focus on place. The human person sanctified by intimate communion, must emerge from this communion to sanctify the world.

The priest sees order and chaos as the two poles of existence. Whereas order is represented in worship as ordained by the Creator God, chaos is represented by idolatry. The Old Testament seems at times to be obsessed by the sin of idolatry. False worship threatens the very fundamentals of Israel's election as a holy nation as well as the principles of the created order. This too is presented structurally in the second part of the Book of Exodus where the two versions of the commandments to build the Tent (25-31 and 35-40) are separated from each other by the narrative of the Golden Calf (Ex 32). The Tent is a prefiguration of the Temple that Solomon will build in Jerusalem (1Kg 5-8) and the Calf a prefiguration of the two calves that Jeroboam ben Nevat will set up for worship in the Northern Kingdom (1 Kg 12).

The divinely ordained program to construct the Tent and its contents begins with the command to collect the riches that were taken from the Egyptians (Ex 25:1-9) in order to "make me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them" (Ex 25:8). While Moses is on the holy mountain receiving the instructions to build the Tent, the people come to Aaron and pressure him to build for them a god. Aaron collects these same materials, taken from the Egyptians, and what emerges is a calf, a parody of the Egyptian (or Canaanite) divine bull. The Calf is formed by a people that seeks to be enslaved in Egypt whereas divine worship seeks to form the people as children of God. The battle for the heart of the people continues here between God and Pharaoh. God's anger that would lead to the destruction (the de-creation) of the people is staved off by Moses' intercession for the people and so God's grace (re-creation) conquers his anger.

Exegetes have pointed out the similarity between the Golden Calf, constructed by Aaron, brother of Moses, and the contents of the Tent. These similarities are particularly pointed with regard to the "kapporet" (כַּפֹּרֶת), of which God says: "There I will meet with you" (Ex

³⁰ Cf. Ex 31:12-18. The commandment to observe the Lord's Sabbaths is taken up at the beginning of the repetition of the laws by Moses to the people, cf. Ex 35:1-3.

25:22). The Hebrew term "kapporet"³¹ is derived from the verb "to atone for"³² (כפר). The significance of the Kapporet is underlined in the description of the central rite in Leviticus, the rite of atonement, performed once a year for the people (Lev 16:13-15). Hartley comments:

It is at the Kapporet that the most critical blood rites for achieving expiation were performed on the Day of Atonement, for the Kapporet was the cultic line of demarcation between the Lord and his people, the place where God's people might find forgiveness from the transcendent God who manifested his presence in the cloud.³³

It is interesting to note that it is only in the annual rite of atonement that the Kapporet is mentioned in Leviticus, nowhere else is the word used. It clearly represents a particularly holy object, as God tells Moses to tell Aaron:

Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat (kapporet) that is upon the ark or he will die, for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat (Lev 16:2).

The Calf is a parody of the Kapporet, the locus of God's presence. Both Calf and Kapporet are made of pure gold and are molded into identifiable forms of creatures (calf and cherubim³⁴). The gold is collected from the people, gold that they had taken from the Egyptians on exiting Egypt. In both the rites of the Calf and the rites of the Kapporet it is Aaron who presides. However, whereas the Kapporet is a locus of meeting, the Calf is proclaimed as "your gods"³⁵ (Ex 32:4) in itself.

The narrative of the Golden Calf is the counter priestly text. It poses the important question of the second half of the book of Exodus: what is the difference between the building of the Tent and the fashioning of the Calf, between worship of God and worship of idols? Ultimately, between order and chaos? The Tent is a space and not an object, an expanse in

³¹ There is no agreed translation for this term. The NRSV translates the term "mercy seat" but the term is linked to the Hebrew verb "to atone". The LXX translated the word in terms of propitiation. I have decided to transliterate rather than translate.

³² The English word "atonement", composed by the 16th century translator of the Bible into English, William Tyndale in order to translate the Hebrew concept, expresses magnificently the basic idea of coming again into the state of being "at – one' with God.

³³ J. HARTLEY, *Leviticus* (Dallas, Word Books, 1992), 235.

³⁴ It is unclear what the cherubim are? Often depicted as winged, mythological creatures, their origin seems to be in the surrounding cultures of Biblical Israel. There are two cherubim and two calves in the places of worship (Dan and Bethel) erected by King Jeroboam in the Northern Kingdom to replace the Temple of Jerusalem (cf. 1Kings 12:28).

³⁵ It is unclear whether this should be translated as singular or plural.

which to meet but it is not God himself. The Tent represents Creation – a new creation and a place of holiness. Here the human prepares him/herself for the coming of God into his/her life. The divine liturgy of the priest renders God present sacramentally but there is no ultimate guarantee apart from the fidelity of God to his promise to be present. It is this fear of absence that provokes the forming of the Calf (cf. Ex 32:1). The Calf represents creatures rather than Creation and replaces God with a creature who is unable to be absent, controlled as it is by the human hands who have formed it.

The importance of distinguishing between true and false worship dominates the Old Testament consciousness.³⁶ Worship, in the priestly consciousness, is the human person's contribution to and affirmation of God as God and his ordained order. True worship in the Tent is a condition for holy living in Creation.

3. A priestly theology of presence

Ordered sacred cult, according to the priestly perception, culminates in the celebration of the presence of God in the midst of his people. Priestly theology is a theology of divine presence. The promise of God at the very beginning of the commandments to prepare a place for the sacred cult is unequivocal:

And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell (ושכנתי)
among them (בתוכם) (Ex 25:8).

The promise is that when the people make the sanctuary, God will dwell among them. Indeed, he dwells among the people consecrated by the act of making a holy space. At the outset, the indwelling among the people is emphasized rather than God's dwelling in the sanctuary. The promise of God's presence is expressed here by the verb "to dwell" (שכן) which shares the same root with the word *mishkan* (משכן, translated in the NRSV as "tabernacle").³⁷ The word "tabernacle" (משכן) is used for the first time in the Biblical text in the verse that follows the one that contains God's promise: "In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle (משכן) and of all its furniture, so you

³⁶ This is central in the New Testament too and can be seen as a central theme in the Book of Revelation.

³⁷ Later Rabbinic theology will develop the concept of *Shekhina*, God's indwelling presence, from this same root.

shall make it (Hebrew: so you shall do³⁸ (ויכן תעשו)) (Ex 25:9). The priestly texts that describe the construction of the Tent and the tabernacle and that promulgate the behavior within this sacred space, reach a peak in Leviticus 9 where Aaron and his sons initiate the sacred cult "on the eighth day" (Lev 9:1). The elaborate system of sacrifices and cultic acts culminate with the blessing that results:

Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he came down after sacrificing the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. Moses and Aaron entered the Tent of Meeting, and then came out and blessed the people; and **the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people**. Fire came out from the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces (Lev 9:22-24).

The appearance of the glory of the Lord to all the people follows on the blessed state of the people that results from the fulfillment of the commandments of God and the initiation of the sacred cult.³⁹

Whereas the prophet is the person who renders God present in the conjunction of the word and the act of hearing, the priest renders God present in the visual of cultic ritual that transforms matter into sacramental presence. God is present in the sacrament; the invisible becomes visible. This is presented as a possibility in the covenantal ritual that is enacted at Sinai. Moses recites the Torah to the people who respond: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (Ex 24:7). Moses then splashes the blood of the sacrificed animals on the people, the sign of a new birth. The narrative then continues:

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadav, and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank (Ex 24:9-11).

This vision of God precedes the instructions that are given for the Tent (Ex 25-31, 35-40) and the commandments concerning the sacred cult (Lev 1-8). This vision provides an opening parenthesis that is closed with the vision of the glory of the Lord at the initiation of the divine cult in Leviticus 9.

³⁸ Perhaps a foreshadowing of Jesus' own instructions with regard to the Paschal meal: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19).

³⁹ Seeing God (or God's glory) has already featured in the Exodus text, where after taking upon themselves the full yoke of the commandments (Ex 24:3.8), the representatives of the people eat and drink and see God (cf. Ex 24:10-11).

The presence of God is guaranteed by God himself in the rituals that are carried out in the vicinity of the Tent. These rituals are primarily constituted by the offerings that must be brought to the Lord. The first part of the Book of Leviticus lays out the rituals for these offerings, beginning:

The Lord summoned (called to) Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you brings (offers) an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring (offer) your offering from the herd or from the flock (Lev 1:1-2).

The word translated "offering" by the NSRV is the Hebrew word "qorban" (קרבן). In fact the NSRV obscures the insistence of the Hebrew text on the use of the word. The expression "bringing an offering", used twice in the English, is in the Hebrew an expression that repeats the same root word twice "offer an offering" (הקריב קרבן), thus repeating the root (q.r.v. קרב) four times in this one verse. The Hebrew word for "offering" (qorban) is a specifically priestly feature in the composition of the Pentateuch. Etymologically, the word refers to a gift offered to a king, and replaces the word "sacrifice" (זבח) used elsewhere in the Bible. It is derived from a root that is very evocative in the Hebrew language. The word "close" (קרוב) is derived from the same root. The expression "in the midst of" (בקרבו) is also derived from the same root. The root evokes relationship, the offering establishes relationship and brings God close, even into the midst of the people's being.⁴⁰ The God who takes up a dwelling place in the Tent of Meeting is the God who dwells in the midst of the people as a real presence. This God is at the origin of the dynamic principle that sets the people in motion as God's agents of holiness:

Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (...) Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. (Ex 40:34.36-37).

God is present among the people, restoring relationship as he walks among them and they walk in him.

⁴⁰ Zephaniah uses the words deriving from the root (q.r.v. קרב) and chapters 1 and 3 of his book play on the root – between "the day of the Lord is close" (1:7.14) and "the Lord in your midst" (3:15.17).

The elaborate Biblical sacrificial cult does not imprison God but renders the human person present (again) to a God who has promised to be present. There is no doubt that the elaborate system of offerings carried out by the priests is fraught with danger. This is made evident in the narrative that immediately follows the beginning of the cult and the vision of God's glory. Aaron's sons, priests with their father, are annihilated when they offer "strange fire" before the Lord:

Now Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord meant when he said, **'Through those who are near me** (בקרובי)⁴¹ I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified'" (Lev 10:1-3).

The tragic episode of Nadav and Avihu, told without drama, is a parallel to the dramatic tale of the Golden Calf, where Aaron was the tragic protagonist. Idolatry does not accept God's absence. The problem of absence provokes the molding of the Gold Calf. Idolatry renders God permanently present, imprisoning the god idea in matter – either a false god is rendered present or the true God is wrongly represented.

The Hebrew expression "strange fire" (אש זרה), the offering that constitutes Nadav and Avihu's sin, translated by the NRSV as "unholy fire", is enigmatic. It does seem to be decoded though by the words: "such as he had not commanded them". God is rendered present only through the rite of representation that God himself has ordained. The struggle to remain on the straight and narrow in the worship of a God totally other is immediately doomed to failure. Yet, the rite itself also includes an intricate and detailed set of reparations that mend the oversights, errors and unintentional malpractices of the people often through the spilling of blood. The priest works in blood. The blood of animals is sprinkled, poured and splashed in various directions: on the Kapporet, on the altar and even on the people. Blood is life and represents a meeting between God and the human person:

If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. **For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making**

⁴¹ "Those who are near me" (בקרובי) are those who offer (קרבו) to the Lord what he has asked for.

atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement (Lev 17:10-11).⁴²

Blood, which conveys the life of the flesh, is at the heart of the central atonement rite that the priest must undertake once a year in order to sanctify the people and the place of worship (cf. Lev 16). The details of the rite of this Day of Atonement are described as acts of sprinkling blood in the most holy places – on the Kapporet, in the Tent and on the altar, all defiled by a people so different from the God that calls them to be holy. The priest must re-present (present again) the people to God in a representation rite ordained by the God who is present. This act of re-presenting is soaked in blood that is life itself.

The offerings made by the priest **re-present** the people to God. Firstly, the offerings are cultic and not psycho-social in that they restore the people to holiness when this holiness is impaired by unintentional acts or involuntary states that sully the people. Intentional sins must find their just reparation in the world in which they were committed. Secondly, the offerings are cultic and not ethical in that they make the people holy again so that the people can come into the divine presence. Sins of a social nature are not rectified by this cultic worship and the cult cannot replace social action. On the contrary, the cultic reconciliation with God is renewal for a life of holiness in the world as the person restored to holiness goes out into the world in order to live in justice and righteousness. This is a very important aspect of the religious system of Israel – cult does not replace the world but prepares and renews one for life in the world.⁴³ The entire elaborate cultic system then becomes a rite of preparation and renewal, of drawing close to God, and of rendering holy matter, space and time so that the human can be with God. The ultimate goal is to transform the macrocosm through the rites in the microcosm, thus sanctifying unto the extremities of the earth. Ultimately, all of creation must become holy space, all humanity holy beings and all time holy Sabbath rest.

The rabbis pointed out that the instructions for the offerings given in the Book of Leviticus begin with the verb "to call to" (ויקרא) ("to summon" in the NRSV translation). The rabbis

⁴² This would seem to be a priestly development on the existing law that can be found in Dt 12:23. It is also inserted in Gen 9:4.

⁴³ This might remind us of the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "so when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or your sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift" (Mat 5:23-24).

link this verb with the one that initiates the crisis that is provoked by Adam's contravention of the commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree:

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God **called to** the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen 3:8-10).

The human person's alienation from God is expressed in Adam's hiding from God when God calls out to him (*wa-yikra* ויקרא) in an attempt to renew a ruptured relationship, whereas God's re-entry into close relationship with Israel is accomplished in God's calling out to Moses (*wa-yikra* ויקרא), marking the initiation of the detailed cult of offerings. Adam withdrew from God's presence (hiding in the trees); Israel enters God's presence (coming into the Tent of Meeting) bearing its offerings, preparing and renewing itself for an encounter that will make Israel apostle of God's holiness. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, describing the priestly cult, underlines the gratuitous gift of the Lord's presence in our all too human world:

The cult is a vast symbolism of grace, an expression of God's "condescension" (in the Patristic sense of beneficent adaptation) towards human beings, since he established it for pardon, purification, sanctification and preparation for direct contact with his presence (*kabod*, glory).⁴⁴

Presiding at the sacred cult and instituting the sacraments of presence, the priest renews humanity in its awareness of God's presence. In this renewal of matter and spirit, the human person can celebrate God's presence in a sober calling to mind that it is he or she who has been absent. It is this renewed consciousness of God's presence that is carried forth from the sanctuary to the ends of the earth.

4. A priestly theology of joy

One of the final commandments in the Pentateuch is the commandment to bring the first fruits of the land to the place that God has chosen and there present them to the priest while

⁴⁴ PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), n. 46.

making a confession of faith that remembers God's saving deeds in favor of Israel (Dt 26:1-15).

Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, **shall celebrate (rejoice)** with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house (Dt 26:11).

The act of memory of the saving deeds of God, culminating in the bringing of Israel into the land, leads to the act of thanksgiving, the necessary condition for receiving a gift as a gift and not as a rightful appropriation. Here I would like to dwell on the commandment to rejoice. The NRSV translates the Hebrew word (ושמחה) in Dt 26:11 with the term "to celebrate", however, the term might be better translated as "to rejoice". In fact, a few verses later, in the instruction to initiate the divine cult in the land, at Mount Ebal, the verb is repeated and translated this time rejoice:

You must build the altar of the Lord your God of unhewn stones. Then offer up burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God, make sacrifices of well-being, and eat them there, **rejoicing (ושמחה) before the Lord** your God. You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly (Dt 27:6-8).

The commandment to rejoice integrates the words of the law and the words of the narrative of God's mighty saving deeds done for Israel's sake, thus serving as a fitting conclusion to the law. Joy is not a significant element in the vocabulary of the specifically priestly texts in the Pentateuch. The only time the word is used in Leviticus is in relation to the Feast of Tabernacles when it is said: "you shall rejoice (ושמחתם) before the Lord your God for seven days" (Lev 23:40)⁴⁵. However, I would like to suggest that joy is an essential element in the Old Testament's theology of priesthood and of cult. The words "rejoice" and "joy" resound in the texts that describe the living out of the cult after the Book of Leviticus.⁴⁶ Among the books that repeatedly use these words to describe the correct attitude for the unfolding of the cult are Deuteronomy, the Books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah and the Psalms. All of these books are fundamentally concerned with cult and worship.

⁴⁵ This is echoed as fulfillment in Neh 8:17, in the description of the Feast of Tabernacles that follows the recitation of the Law by Ezra in the rebuilt Jerusalem.

⁴⁶ This joy reaches its plenitude in the descriptions of the heavenly (or earthly liturgical) worship in the Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament when all of human existence becomes a joyful act of worship (cf. Rev 5:11-13).

In Deuteronomy⁴⁷, the commandments begin with a sharp distinction between idolatry and true worship. In prescribing the place for true worship, the text commands:

But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there, bringing there your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your households together, **rejoicing (ושמחתם) in all the undertakings** in which the Lord your God has blessed you (Dt 12:5-7).

Being in the presence of the Lord is cause for rejoicing. Many of the other texts that speak of being in the place (the Deuteronomistic term for the Temple) also add the element of rejoicing (cf. 12:12.18, 14:26, 16:11.14.15, 26:11, 27:7).

The second series of history books (as grouped in the Christian Old Testament, from 1Chr to Neh) also focuses on the cult and its re-establishment after the Exile. Here too the terms "to rejoice" and "joy" characterize the cult. In the description of the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and placing it in the Tent, David is described as meticulously ordering the cult in the holy place.⁴⁸ An important element in this order is the ordaining of the singers and musicians who accompany the cult and who are commanded "to raise loud sounds of joy (שמחה)" (1Chr 15:16). The ark is then brought to Jerusalem "with rejoicing (שמחה)" (1Chr 15:25). The scene of David's ecstatic leaping and dancing before the Ark (1Chr 15:29, cf. 2Sam 6:16) is firmly rooted in the joy that surrounds the cult. The entry of the Ark provides the narrative context for the Chronicler of the initiation of the psalms, as those appointed by David are "to invoke, to thank and to praise the Lord" within the context of Temple cult that manifests God's presence: "Honor and majesty are before him, strength and joy are in his place" (1Chr 16:27). The Chronicler presents King David as a second Moses; it is he who gives the instructions for the building of the Temple. In the text that is parallel to Ex 25 (the contributions for the construction of the Tent and the Tabernacle), David initiates the collection of the contributions for the work of construction of the Temple. As the gifts flow into the treasury, the Chronicler concludes:

⁴⁷ According to most historical-critical hypotheses, the D source (behind Deuteronomy) is older than the P and H sources (behind Leviticus). We are interested here in the final canonical form of the Pentateuch, perhaps redacted by a priestly element, that puts Deuteronomy as the final word.

⁴⁸ This is a fundamental difference between the David of the Deuteronomist historian, whose David has no part in building the Temple, and the Chronicler's David who plans the Temple down to the last detail, leaving it for Solomon to construct. This suggests a new Moses – Joshua relationship between David and Solomon.

Then the people **rejoiced** (וישמחו) because these had given willingly, for with single mind they had offered freely to the Lord; King David also **rejoiced greatly** (שמה שמחה) (1 Chr 29:9).

David's prayerful rejoicing as the contributions flow culminates in a joyous feasting that evokes Sinai's covenant moment: "and they ate and drank before the Lord on that day with great joy" (1Chr 29:22a).⁴⁹ This marks the end of David's reign and the transfer to his son, Solomon, in the Chronicler narrative. This joy connected to the cult is a feature throughout the Chronicler's writings (cf. 1Chr 29:17,22, 2Chr 7:10, 15:15, 23:21, 24:10, 30:23,25,26). This accent continues through the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah too (Ezr 3:12-13, 6:22, Neh 8:12,17,27 12:43-44).

Finally, the book of the Bible that accompanies the divine cult more than any other is that of the Psalms. Here too the focus on joy within the cultic context is striking. Psalm 122, the psalm that proposes going to the Temple, begins with an outburst of joy: "I was glad (I rejoiced שמחתי) when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" (Ps 122:1). This joy characterizes the response of the people to the invitation to approach the Temple. The joyful exclamation in the psalm for Tabernacles: "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice (be glad) and be glad (rejoice נשמחה) in it." (Ps 118:24) is the joy of the worshipper celebrating God and the intimate interchange with him that the cult allows for. This joy is encapsulated in Psalm 100:

Make a joyful (jubilant) noise to the Lord, all the earth. ² Worship the Lord with gladness (joy שמחה); come into his presence with singing. ³ Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. ⁵ For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations (Ps 100:1-5).

Worship is at its peak when it is filled with the heartfelt, throbbing joy of encountering the living God.⁵⁰

Conclusion: The necessary dialogue

⁴⁹ This scene is again evoked after the reading of the Law in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, where feasting and great rejoicing are described (Neh 8:12).

⁵⁰ The semantic field of joy and rejoicing in the Book of Psalms is too extensive to cover adequately here.

The priest is one of the four principal mediators in the relationship between God and God's people in the Old Testament. In order to carry out his task in fidelity and truth, the priest must be in dialogue with the other principal mediators: king, sage and prophet. In his wisdom, God does not give all the gifts to one member, but rather assures the functioning of the social-spiritual body by insisting on the collaboration of all its members (cf. 1Cor 12-14).

The danger of priesthood and cult is that cult can become "manipulative self indulgence", according to the expression of Brueggemann⁵¹. The priest is in constant danger of taking himself too seriously, thus deceiving the people and promising what he cannot deliver. as man of the law; he can become too legalistic and obsessive about formal categories forgetting the social space in which he must function and find his place. The cult is in danger of taking precedence over the dignity of the human person. In addition, the priest might overemphasize the boundaries between sacred space and the rest of creation, retreating obsessively into designated sacred space and ignoring the fact that God's sacred space knows no boundaries. Finally, the priest is in danger of seeing himself as the unique guarantor of God's presence. This kind of cult "substitutes self referenced manipulation for trustful submissiveness."⁵² In order to avoid these dangers, the constant dialogue between the priest and each of the other mediators: king, sage and prophet, is essential.

The dialogue between priest and king focuses on the socio-political and historical contingencies in which priestly coherence must find its place.⁵³ There must be a constant dialogue between the coherence of the sacred cult and the contingent historical socio-political and economic context in which it is celebrated in the world. The king represents this contingency *par excellence*, situated as he is in the world of events. The king, called to be the representative of God's authority, justice and peace in the world, draws the attention of the priest to these worldly contingencies (politics, economics, social dynamics, etc) in which priestly coherency unfolds in the cultic acts. The priest who turns into contingent political actor, loses the freedom necessary to enact and guarantee the holiness of God in the human world. However, the priest who ignores contingencies risks sanctifying the

⁵¹ W. BRUEGGMANN, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 699.

⁵² IDEM.

⁵³ One interesting Biblical text on this theme is the description of the encounter between David and Ahimelech in 1Sam 21:1-10. This confrontation is referred to by Jesus in Mk 2:23-28 in which Jesus reminds his hearers that "Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (2:28).

status quo by celebrating the sacred rites of sacramental presence in a context that makes the presence of God absurd. Even more importantly, he risks turning the cult itself into an idol, ignoring the fullness of the human person, whom he is supposed to be forming for holiness.

The dialogue between the priest and the sage must focus on the correct relationship between all creation, on the one hand, and holy time, holy space and holy things, on the other hand. The priest is authorized by God to make certain aspects of creation holy. This sacramental role is fundamental to the reopening of channels of communication between God and the human person who is sinner. However, the priest is in danger of attempting to imprison God in the holiness that he enacts. The sage reminds the priest that God created all humans in holiness and the human inability to perceive this holiness is linked to the human's fallen state. Ultimately all are called to be a kingdom of priests in which the Temple is each human body, destined to carry God's holiness to the ends of the earth.

Finally, the dialogue between priest and prophet must hold up the primacy of God's word. Whereas the priest renders God present within the visual unfolding of acts of worship and offering, the prophet reminds us that God is ultimately beyond human activity. Absence and presence are fundamental to God's free engagement with the human person and the priest must hear the prophet so as not to fall into the danger of adoring a Calf rather than the living God, mediating the fire of Sinai rather than offering "strange fire"⁵⁴. The prophet's word insists on clear distinctions between true and false, between upright and sinful that ultimately must be integrated into the priestly vision of holy and common, clean and unclean. The prophets rail against a cult and a priesthood that are impervious to a living, speaking God and a sinful and suffering humanity. The priests can not imprison God in the cult but rather he must seek to prepare the human person for a living encounter with God beyond the cult. Isaiah's words right at the beginning of the Prophetic Books ring out:

¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ¹² When you come to appear before me,¹ who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; ¹³ bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation

⁵⁴ This refers again to the experience of Nadav and Avihu, paradigmatic priestly figures, who witnessed God as "a devouring fire" (Ex 24:17) yet they saw him and ate and drank in his presence (Ex 24:9-11). However, they were then devoured by this fire when they offered "strange fire" on the altar (Lev 10:1).

-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Is 1:11-17).

This is not a rejection of cult and priesthood, but rather a reminder that the cult is preparation for holy and righteous living (cf. Lk 1:75) beyond cultic space and time.⁵⁵ Without the conjunction of righteousness and justice, cultic acts can become idolatrous make belief.

Cult for cult's sake is indeed idolatry. How easy it is to be saints in the Holy of Holies, where we have come, holy and reverential, before a God that we have locked into the Temple we have made with our own hands! How difficult it is to live holy and reverential lives in the world called to become a Holy of Holies to which we are sent. God is no more present in the Holy of Holies than he is in the world even though we might indeed be more present to him there because of our rigorous preparation to participate in the sacred rites.⁵⁶ The conclusion of the cult is a sending into the world where each human being is called to become a priestly presence, making the God who is present visible in the world and especially in the face of each person created in God's image and likeness.

⁵⁵ In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' final parable is one that drives this point home: we will be ultimately judged not by our piety alone but by how our piety prepares us to be agents of justice and love in the world, cf. Mt 25:31-46.

⁵⁶ This is perhaps the reason why Jesus does not simply repeat the priestly injunction: "Be holy as I am holy" but rather points to its fulfillment beyond the realms that the human person considers holy. At the end of his commentary on different laws in his first great discourse in Matthew's Gospel, he says: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48), a call to go beyond the holiness of the priest in the cultic locus and to become "a living sacrifice" (Rom 12:1), perfect and without blemish, for the holiness of the world.