

‘Now I see’ John 9.25

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It is almost ten years since I first experienced an Orthodox Liturgy, and what I saw and heard on that occasion changed the whole course of my research and understanding of the Jerusalem temple. I had been in Oxford on Saturday, February 6th 1999, at the invitation of the Fellowship of St John the Baptist, to lead a study day on temple themes. I still have the pink folder with the spare handouts. One session was entitled ‘On Earth as it is in Heaven’ and the other ‘For we have a Great High Priest.’ It all seems a very long time ago, because, looking at those handouts now, I realise just how far my thought has developed.

In the first session I described the shape and significance of the tabernacle and temple: the veil, the priests who functioned as the angels, the high priest who passed between heaven and earth. In the second I described the Day of Atonement as I had begun to reconstruct it from texts contemporary with Christian origins, texts such as the *Assumption of Moses*, *1 Enoch*, and the slightly but significantly different version of Deuteronomy found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Atonement in temple tradition was not appeasing an angry God - familiar to me from my very Protestant upbringing - but the act of divine self-giving that renewed and restored the creation, human society, and each individual. It restored the bonds of the eternal covenant. The high priest took blood into the holy of holies, offered it at the throne, and then emerged again and used it to heal and restore. This blood represented the life of the LORD, his self offering.

The ritual of the temple could, I had come to realise, be discerned in several Old Testament texts that had somehow lost their context. One of these was Deuteronomy 32.43, which describes the LORD coming to heal the land of his people on the Day of Judgement, that is, on the Day of Atonement. It was used by the early Christians to identify the role of Jesus (Hebrews 1.6), but part of this text has disappeared from the Hebrew used today. The vital line quoted in Hebrews is in the Greek text and in the

Dead Sea Scrolls text; there is no question that the Christians 'added' it, as had formerly been supposed. It describes the LORD coming with his angels on the Day of Atonement. One possible explanation of the discrepancy between the texts is that this verse was dropped by the rabbis, along with several others, because it was an important prophecy for the Christians. Justin Martyr was complaining about this in the mid second century, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*.

My instinct was that this temple ritual of Atonement was the original setting for the Eucharist. The gospel accounts all set the Last Supper at Passover time, and this has led to an almost exclusive emphasis on Passover symbolism for the Last Supper. The New Testament, however, interprets the death of Jesus as the true Day of Atonement sacrifice (Hebrews 9.11-14), and there are many places where early Christian writers used Day of Atonement images to describe the Eucharist. Was it possible, I wondered, that the original understanding of the death of Jesus and the Eucharist had been rooted in the Day of Atonement and not just in Passover?

There were many arguments against the Passover context, despite the setting of the Last Supper. Passover was not a sacrifice offered by a priest, let alone the high priest. Passover blood was not taken into the holy of holies - in fact the Passover ritual took place in the temple courtyard and in people's homes - and Passover was not for the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of the covenant.

After the first session one of the participants - alas I cannot remember who - asked if I knew anything about the Orthodox Liturgy, because what I had been saying sounded familiar to him. I admitted to complete ignorance, and so he suggested that I stay until the Sunday and attend the Episcopal Liturgy at the Church of the Annunciation in Oxford. I did, and 'things' have never been quite the same since. It is not easy, trying to think back nearly ten years, to recover what happened in my mind that morning. I found my old diary and looked in that - nothing there except the times of the sessions and a reminder to make the photocopies. I have to try to reconstruct my thinking as it was ten years ago.

First, some personal background. I had been fascinated for many years with the world of the Jerusalem temple and how it related to the Dead Sea Scrolls and other non-canonical texts that were becoming more and more important in biblical studies. These ‘pseudepigrapha’ are now the fastest growing area of biblical studies and any study confined to the traditional ‘sola scriptura’ of my Protestant upbringing has a wholly inadequate view of the field. There was also an obvious chasm between the work of Old Testament scholars and New Testament scholars, and between them and just about everyone else in the field broadly known as ‘theology’, not to mention the church communities, their life and worship.

As I explored the earliest Christian texts, I had discovered that they had understood the death of Jesus in terms of the Day of Atonement, *and* that they had read the whole Old Testament very differently from the way we read it today - or rather, from the way I had been brought up to read it. The first Christians had understood that the LORD, [Yahweh/Jehovah] in the Old Testament, the God of Israel, had been the LORD of the New Testament. The One who appeared to the patriarchs had been the Second Person and not the First. This misreading had been reinforced by the Jerusalem Bible, which uses Yahweh in the Old Testament and ‘the Lord’ in the New, thus obscuring what must be the most important link in the Bible¹ - the Jesus was Yahweh. A new theology graduate attending the study day asked me what had happened to Yahweh after the Old Testament. He had somehow disappeared, she said, at least from the way she had been taught the New Testament. She had asked an important question. If this fundamental aspect of the Christian claim had been lost [the original meaning of ‘Jesus is LORD’], might the Day of Atonement link also have slipped from view?

On that Sunday in February 1999 I had almost finished writing my commentary on the Book of Revelation². For months I had been steeped in temple imagery and heavenly liturgy. This was the world of the first Christians: angel hosts around the throne, angels

¹ I explored this in my book *The Great Angel*, London: SPCK 1992.

² *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000.

emerging from heaven, incense and hymns, the kingdom of priests established on earth. At the centre was the Lamb, slain but now living and enthroned in heaven, and preparing to return to earth. John had seen the risen LORD as the Great High Priest in the temple, and the 'Hebrews' had been reminded that their Great High Priest had passed into the heavens, having made the great atonement sacrifice (Hebrews 1.1-4). The key prophecy for this claim had 'disappeared' from the Hebrew scriptures, so it must have been important. Perhaps it was even represented in the earliest liturgies. The Book of Revelation does suggest this.

I went to the little Orthodox church on Sunday morning for the Liturgy, which was in English that Sunday, and remember someone offering me a Greek text to follow the service. Perhaps it was Greek and English - I do not remember - but I do remember being amazed at 'familiar' Greek lines that I had never seen before. I remember the words as Bishop Basil was vested: 'He hath clothed thee in the garment of salvation; and with the vesture of gladness hath he covered thee; he hath placed a crown upon thee as on a bridegroom, and hath adorned thee as a bride with comeliness.' The words are from Isaiah 61.10, but here from the Greek which has 'robe of gladness', whereas the Hebrew - and thus the English versions - has 'robe of righteousness.' But why were these linked to vesting a bishop? Nothing in the Old Testament suggests this. The random use of some suitable words? Or was there more to it?

I had just finished writing a commentary on Isaiah³ and so was more familiar with the Hebrew text than I might otherwise have been. The Hebrew here has a problem, since the verb used is 'he had made me a priest', so, literally, the Hebrew would read: 'As a bridegroom he has made me a priest with a turban.' This is usually emended to give the familiar 'as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland...', but the Authorised Version does mark the difficulty with a note: 'decketh as a priest'. The Greek text does not have this link to the priesthood, but it does appear in the Targum, the ancient Aramaic translation and expansion of Isaiah: 'As a bridegroom who is happy in his bride chamber,

³ Published in Eerdmans' *Commentary on the Bible*, edd. J D G Dunn and J W Rogerson, Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003

as the high priest that is adorned with his garments, and as a bride who decks herself with her ornaments.’ These words of vesting - or the memory that prompted them - must have been rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, not the Greek, or else in the Targum.

As I watched, especially the movement of the liturgy, it dawned on me that this was the temple. This was the high priest entering the holy of holies, behind the veil, and emerging again. This was not Passover. The Cherubic Hymn, though I had never encountered it before, was clearly the theophanic procession implied in the words in Hebrews that are missing from the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy: ‘When he brings the Firstborn into the world, he says “Let all God’s angels worship him”’ (Hebrews 1.6). This was St Peter’s sermon in Solomon’s porch as St Luke reconstructed it, the earliest exposition of the faith: Jesus returning from heaven on the Day of Atonement to bring times of renewal, that is, the Kingdom (Acts 3, esp. 17-21).

It was as though the beads in my kaleidoscope had been moved. I had already accumulated a fair amount of material about the temple and its world, trying to enter the ‘mind’ of the temple priests, rather than just recovering the practical aspects of running the huge operation that was the temple. I often quote the standard [and very useful] work of reference on Judaism in the time of Jesus⁴, that deals with the temple only in terms of the hierarchy and priestly families, their rights and revenues, management of ceremonial, security and the duties of Levites. The *Mishnah* itself, our major source of information about the temple in the time of Jesus, deals with practical matters like clearing the ashes from the altar and wood chopping, but has nothing of the theology. My quest was, and still is, for the theology, the mind set, the world view, of the temple priests. This has to be reconstructed from other texts, which may or may not have had a temple provenance. There is no way of knowing. It is a process not unlike trying to make up a jig-saw puzzle, with many pieces missing, many pieces mixed in from other puzzles, and no surviving box lid with the picture. I had never dreamed that this world of the temple had survived in the liturgy of the Church.

⁴ Emil Schürer *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. Geza Vermes and Fergus Millarm, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973.

After that Sunday, excitement took over. I quickly wrote a piece 'Parousia and Liturgy' which became an excursus at the end of my Revelation commentary that was about to go to press. This appeared the following year, 2000. When I outlined my ideas to the late David Melling, he introduced me to the Akathist Hymn, and another familiar world appeared before me. I knew those images of Mary as descriptions of Wisdom, the lost Lady of the original temple. They had survived in this great Byzantine Hymn, but addressed to Mary. How this happened was to become another fascinating quest.

Since that Sunday in February 1999, a lot of work has been done and there is so much more to do: fields to be re-ploughed and sifted, ancient cupboards to be turned out and their contents scrutinised, foundations of many current assumptions to be uncovered and tested. I often recall the words of Bulgakov, written about the Wisdom tradition, but applicable, I think, to the temple tradition as a whole.

All this wealth of symbolism has been preserved in the archives of ecclesiastical antiquities, but, covered by the dust of ages, it has been no use to anyone. The time has come for us, however, to sweep away the dust of ages, and to decipher the sacred script, to reinstate the tradition of the Church, in this instance all but broken, as a living tradition.⁵

⁵ S Bulgakov, 'The Wisdom of God' (1937) reprinted in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, edd J Pain and N Zernov, London: SPCK, 1976, pp. 144-56, p. 146