

STUDY 8

Israel—God’s Priestly Community

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On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel’ (Exod. 19:1–6).

Before Israel was given a structured internal priesthood God established her as His priest-nation. So her priestly ministry was not first of all internal and for herself but had to do with what God planned for all nations:

... but you shall be called the priests of the LORD;
they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God;
you shall eat the wealth of the nations,
and in their glory you shall boast (Isa. 61:6).

Who Israel was, how she had become who she was and where she was headed had to do with what God had covenanted to her forefather Abraham. She was to become a great nation (Gen. 12:1–3). The ‘greatness’ promised to Abraham was not to be like the greatness of other nations. Rather it had to do with the nature of God’s presence to her and His plan for the whole of creation. Her greatness was the light given her to lighten the nations:

Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
‘I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

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I am the LORD; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.
Behold, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth
I tell you of them’ (Isa. 42:5–9).

Israel could only bear to the nations what God blessed her with; she had no ‘light’ in and of herself. Her light was the light of the Lord (Isa. 2:5; Ps. 36:9). Her life lived under the grace of God’s covenanted presence became a light in the darkness of universal idolatry. By the Lord’s blessing she would become like a well-watered garden and a spring that would not fail (Isa. 58:6–14). Israel’s priesthood would be marked by the effusiveness of the love, mercy and purpose of God. This paper is an exploration of the greatness of Israel’s priesthood according to God’s effusive presence and ministry to her. As Israel received God’s covenant with joy and played out its daily life in the practical familial blessings of God’s law it would declare God’s will to and for the nations.

ISRAEL, PRIEST-NATION FORMED BY THE PRESENCE OF GOD

God’s Presence Formative from the Beginning

The personal presence of the Lord to His people was always essential in the outworking of the eternal covenant. Seen first in Eden, the couple knew Him as the One who was present. Knowing His will in the context of His presence (seeing the nature of His loving) humanity could delight in life with Him. Nothing of His commanding or His commands would have been seen as burdensome. This meant that true glorifying of God would have been freely shared.

God’s Covenanted Presence

The Lord’s presence was confirmed to the Patriarchs by covenant. From the beginning with Abraham the idol worshipper, the glory of God appeared and was maintained to Israel by God’s covenant.

God’s Presence Formed Israel

In Exodus the covenant reached a new formative phase as the Lord galvanised Israel into a nation. His formation of Israel as His own special treasure was achieved through salvation and the giving of the law. Both these actions of God revolve around Israel knowing and delighting in the Lord’s presence. Both salvation and the receiving of the law are given personally by the Lord and both are sacraments of His ongoing presence.

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Israel’s Worship, a Witness to the Presence of the Lord

All Israel’s worship and service flowed from the Lord’s delight in being present and her delight in His presence. Israel’s perpetual flirting with and seduction by the idols of the nations surrounding her must be seen in this light. She is not a special treasure in name and status only. In treasuring Israel, and remaining faithful to her by treasuring her continually, God changed her heart. She would have to press against that change, deny the power of love, and thus rage against the person of God present to her if she was to be seduced by the idols.

God’s Presence and Israel’s Destiny

After the worship of the golden calf, Moses cried, ‘If Your presence will not go with me [or, us], do not bring us up from here’ (Exod. 33:15).

... without Yahweh’s presence Israel and Moses are not just certain to fail the destiny set before them; they cannot even begin it, because they will have lost their identity as a ‘special treasure,’ Yahweh’s ‘own kingdom of priests and holy people’.¹

Israel’s Witness, God’s Presence against the Idols

Exodus is the account of God’s nation emerging from within the idols of Egypt into a people who would worship the Lord as a true adoring member of His family; His firstborn, pregnant with the inheritance of the nations (Exod. 4:23).

Israel’s emergence from Egypt as God’s nation is not just a description of events but the story of the personal intervention of God and His ongoing intimacy:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself (Exod. 19:4).

This poetic narrative, probably used in doxological form in Israel’s worship, provides a summary of all Moses’ ‘proof of presence’ passages.² ‘You . . . have seen what I did to the Egyptians’ emphasises the Lord’s dramatic personal intervention in the judgements upon Pharaoh and then his army at the Red Sea. This intervention was not simply political for Pharaoh was seen in Egypt as a god-king. The Lord’s personal triumph over him was therefore a witness to the nation Egypt that He was indeed the Lord of heaven and earth and thus of all nations. Moses in his song (Deut. 32:1–43) called upon the whole earth to hear Israel’s praise for the Lord’s personal intervention.

So calling Israel to be a priest-nation was no calling to a strange or foreign way for humanity. It was a restoration (a call back) to the essence, an irrepressible overflowing witness to the glory of God’s loving.

‘To bear them on eagles’ wings’ illustrates the Lord’s omnipotent and tender presence in extracting them from the idols and bondage of Egypt.

¹ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC, vol. 3, Word, Waco, 1987, p. 447.

² Durham, p. 262.

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We noted that the victory over Egypt and the exodus of Israel represented more than mere freedom from a stronger power. Pharaoh as Egypt’s god-king was seen by the nation as the one who kept creation in order. Here was the fruit of the fall working itself out at national level; man operating under the illusion of control. When Yahweh gave the ten plagues and then delivered Israel’s escape through the sea, the whole validity of Pharaoh’s rule as a god-king was overturned. In Israel’s exodus God announced to all flesh that idolatry and idol-serving nations must take notice of the God present with Israel.³ In fact Moses declared that nothing like the salvation of Israel and her communion with God had been seen since Eden:

For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him (Deut. 4:32–35).

Israel’s Testimony, the Favour of God

Yahweh’s presence was essential for Israel to know that His favour was upon them. It was His presence as indicating His favour that distinguished them from the nations (Exod. 33:16). This had been the clear lesson given to Moses and Israel whenever God had graciously intervened for them:

Only Yahweh’s Presence with Moses and Israel separates them from all other people throughout the world. It is the lesson Moses learned on Sinai at the time of his call: he alone was not equal to the task of challenging Pharaoh, but he was not to be alone. It is the lesson that Israel learned, by the mighty acts in Egypt, by the deliverance at the sea, by the guidance and provision in the wilderness, and above all by the theophany and the revelation at Sinai: what they had seen, what they had been given, what they had the chance of becoming, all were the direct result of the Presence in their midst of Yahweh.⁴

The presence of Yahweh meant the presence of His blessings, the gifting of His holy life worked out in the daily practice of Israel’s life. This life was what made Israel dazzling in the eyes of the nations. ‘[A] God so near’ and “‘statutes so just,” laws, commandments, and procedures that assume a community of neighbourly economic and political practices’, showed the watching nations that ‘[The] socially powerless in—widows, orphans, aliens—are treated according to social policies and practices that curb oppression and exploitation’. ‘All through the book of Deuteronomy, the tradition is at pains to hold together *holy presence* and *social practice*, for either alone is inadequate and will not grasp the attention of the nations’.⁵

³ Noel Due, *Created for Worship: From Genesis to Revelation to You*, Mentor, Fearn, 2005, pp. 73–4.

⁴ Durham, p. 447.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2001, pp. 52–3.

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ISRAEL’S PRIESTLY LIFE STRUCTURED BY THE PRESENCE OF GOD

If Israel was to be the unique priest-nation showing the presence of Yahweh, how then did that work out in practice? How was Israel able to declare the glory of God?

As God’s special treasure she was holy; that is, separated as a people from all other nations because she belonged to God and belonged with God. In Israel the nations could see in familial terms, ‘God and man at table are sat down’.

Israel’s holiness was not an ethical end in itself; it was the outward expression of her love and delight in God by the hearty and free acceptance of His law. This is what freedom from the bondage of Egypt was about. Israel was freed to be in God’s image, not merely free from making bricks. Out of the chaos of a nation gripped with idols a new nation with a heart for God was born:

For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it (Deut. 30:11–14).

Israel’s acceptable worship (service) was a total life orientation. As she depended upon the grace of the Lord’s presence and related internally and towards her neighbours out of the goodness of that, God would declare His Name to the nations.

Israel’s obedience was far removed from the service of other nations to their idols. Idolatry is the world’s brilliant scheme to attempt to insulate themselves from direct contact with the Lord whom they rejected. In Israel God was not only present but active. Suddenly a nation was travelling as human beings should, in complete delight in God. This was the way Israel would honour Him. Obedience apart from ontological delight is simply a return to subservience and bondage to harsh images:

Because you did not serve the LORD your God *with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things*, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you (Deut. 28:47–48, emphasis mine).

Paul provides us with a snapshot of the glory of being God’s special possession and holy nation in Romans 9:4–5:

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

It was through these blessings that Israel’s daily life was structured. Each of these blessings contained the promise of what God planned for all flesh. So they become a startling revelation of what would eventually come to the nations through Christ the true Israel:

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The Name Israel

Given to Jacob at the point of his immediacy (wrestling) with God, Israel becomes the name for God’s priest-nation. This mysterious exchange marks the start of the intimate wrestling of God with His people and their receiving of His blessing. Calvin comments, ‘God transferred the praise of his own strength to Jacob for the purpose of triumphing in his person’. The formation of Israel was always accompanied by a ‘touching of her hip’ that the nations may see the God of grace, not a nation bent on a theology of glory. At the end of his life Jacob (Israel) prayed that his name might live on in Joseph’s sons and extend all that the name implied to the ends of the earth (Gen. 48:16).

The Adoption of Sons

Israel is redeemed back to sonship:

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me”’ (Exod. 4:22–23; cf. 3:12).

Israel’s life was to be familial and its worship would declare that Yahweh their divine Father⁶ was at the centre of her present life and future hope. The passion of God for His firstborn was seen by the effect of His presence as their Creator–Father–Redeemer.

The first response of sonship is enjoyment (living in the joy of God) and delight. Israel’s energy for daily living would have come from inheriting all the Father’s riches, for they knew that was the blessing of firstborns. Unlike the fickle and harsh experience meted out by the idols of other nations, Yahweh’s passion for His son was seen, sometimes in its most blazing grace, when His son turned from the delight of the inheritance:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more they were called,
the more they went away;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and burning offerings to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up by their arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with chords of kindness,
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws . . .
(Hosea 11:1–4).

Yahweh’s present treasuring, disciplining and nurturing of Israel was like nothing seen across the face of the nations. Every word and deed that Israel did in the freedom

⁶ Durham, p. 56.

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and delight of sonship cried out to the nations the future glory of their inheritance too. In their joyful living as the family of God there was the reverse echo of the true Son who would not only come out of the ‘exodus’ of man’s ‘Egypt’, but would flood the nations with the Holy Spirit, the blessing of Abraham (Gal. 4:4).

Israel’s internal priesthood was with a view to communicating to the nation the grace of living as a beloved son.

The Glory

The glory of God’s presence seen physically in Israel was the glory at Mt Sinai (Exod. 24:16–17), the glory that covered and filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38), the glory that appeared upon the mercy seat in the holy of holies (Lev. 16:2), and the glory that filled the Temple (1 Kings 8:10–11). ‘This glory was the sign of God’s presence with Israel and certified to Israel that God dwelt among them and met with them.’⁷ The meeting was with a view to speaking with them and sanctifying them by the presence of His glory (Exod. 29:42–43).⁸ So the fact that God was present, displaying His glory, formed and kept Israel as a people who were to be constantly looking to Him. The glory of the idols could be seductive and brilliant but no idol could manifest true glory. The praise of God’s glory was to be proclaimed by Israel across the whole earth (Ps. 57:11; 96:3; Isa. 66:19). The continual impact of God’s glory was to convince Israel of God’s riches, power and position. To proclaim God’s glory to the nations Israel must first know it in her heart. The essence of this knowledge was that she experience God’s goodness in His mercy, graciousness, slowness to anger, steadfast love and covenant faithfulness (Exod. 34:6–7). We should not underestimate the impact of Israel living out this knowledge amongst the nations (Isa. 40:5).

The Covenants

Nothing separated Israel from the idolatrous nations like God’s covenant. Idol worship demanded that the worshippers make all kinds of manipulative deals with the idols in order to obtain their blessing. In God’s covenant the order was reversed. God made covenant with Israel, established the freedom of communion by grace and called Israel sovereignly to enjoy it, and treasure it. The elements of covenant life from the beginning were a practical witness to the nations of the way God’s creatures truly live. Israel’s vocation to replenish the earth and rule over it, her life within God’s Sabbath rest and participation in the grace of marriage had within them all the blessings needed to declare the full glory of God to the nations. Other nations looking in on these blessings would have been faced with a revelation of how things really are.

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle of the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971, p. 5.

⁸ Note that the glory of the Lord was linked with the knowledge that the Lord had spoken (Isa. 40:5).

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The Law

As we have noted earlier, the law—the ten words—were given as a sacrament of God’s life and presence to Israel and all flesh. For Israel the law meant the ability to live as the image of God. The presence of God in glory, by covenant love to adopt Israel, fleshes out the ‘I am’ part of the Decalogue and transmits the creative energy to the ‘Thou shalt’.⁹ The law then was given in the first place for Israel’s good (Deut. 10:12–14), but many of Israel’s scriptures point to the universal gift of the law as the way all flesh must live in the image of God (e.g. Ps. 119).

The Worship

The festivals, fasts and the order of their corporate worship all made Israel the people of worship. With the presence of God and His prescriptions for worship a new national gift emerged to the world. Here was a people blessed to return to the edenic joy where the independence of sin could be reversed. Now God had supplied the revelation leading to a true honouring and giving thanks for Him. This was Israel’s vocation. Her worship was not a mishmash of ideas collected from the nations, for that would have simply been a different form of idolatry. By His presence the old gave way and real worship was enjoyed.

The Promises

Israel’s priesthood was not to be the final story. God in speaking to Israel and leading Israel was leading her to His Son. In Him all the covenants and the law and the worship would come to its full universal pitch. Israel was like a high tension power line supported by pylons of God’s promises (Gal. 4:16). The promises of God to Israel were reminders of their inheritance as His firstborn son. No other nation was made the recipient of such promises, yet all other nations were to come to Israel to become the recipients of the same promised blessings.

The Fathers

From Abraham on, Israel shared in the leadership of ‘fathers of the covenant’; men raised up by God to lead the nation towards the Man of the covenant, Christ himself. Although Israel may not have seen Christ clearly, along with Abraham they did see his day and their delight in that was to be a service to the nations.

ISRAEL’S PRIESTHOOD OF THE PRESENCE

So Israel’s inheritance as the treasured possession, the holy nation that thrust her onto the international scene as the witness to God, was rich indeed. Nothing like what was seen in Israel had appeared before. In the place of idolatry flashed the true

⁹ See Otto Weber’s comment as quoted by Geoffrey Bingham in *The Law of Eternal Delight*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, p. 33.

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worship and service of the Lord of heaven and earth. In the place of supposed independence from God that had spawned deadening rebellion and hatred of God, flowed a new ontological delight and honouring of Him, out of which flowed a hearty obedience.

Israel was to become the place to which all the nations would come to know the Lord:

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem
(Isa. 2:2–3; see also 66:18–23).

The people of God were not shut up in that narrow corner of the earth for the purpose of confining within their straitened territories the true knowledge and worship of God: but God wished that to be the fixed seat of the church, from which the sound of the heavenly doctrine should go forth into all nations. Therefore he chose Canaan, which is interjected among the most powerful nations of the world, that from it as from a fountain might more easily issue the doctrine of God to the rest of the nations: as Isaiah says, ‘*Out of Zion will go forth the law*’.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mollerus, quoted in Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 2, Hendrickson, Peabody, n.d., pp. 347f.