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THE CHRISTIAN PRIESTHOOD.

SERMON PREACHED IN ELY CATHEDRAL.

BY THE REV. CANON R. H. KENNETT, D.D., *Regius*
Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge University.

Revelation i. 6: "He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father."

Hebrews vii. 24 f.: "He, because he abideth for ever, hath his priesthood unchangeable. Wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."

IT will be admitted by all who have had experience of such a task that few things are more difficult—one might well say impossible—than to translate the literature of one race into the language of another whose culture and mental equipment are entirely different. It will be frequently found that the one language possesses no equivalent of words which are familiar enough in the other. Modern writers about the religions or customs of heathen nations have therefore found it expedient to adopt words from these nations (when there is no precise English equivalent), as for example, *taboo*, *totem*, and in some cases such words have become incorporated in our English vocabulary. Now modern English has taken shape in a race which for some thirteen centuries has professed the Christian faith, and which, before its conversion to Christianity, possessed no written literature. Our Anglo-Saxon and Danish forefathers, when they first settled in this land, were heathen; and since in their heathen state they were illiterate, their language, before their conversion to Christianity, had not reached the literary development which had been attained by the Greeks and Latins before the Christian era. It would therefore be much easier to express the thought of a native of Central Africa in Greek than in English, because English has entirely lost names for ideas and things connected with paganism, for which names survive in literary Greek. It is important to remember this, for failure to do so is likely to produce, and indeed has produced, an enormous amount of confusion of thought. Most non-Christian nations that have possessed any sort of system of sacrifice or of precise religious ritual, have a class of men who have special knowledge of this ritual and of all the taboos connected with it, and who, moreover, have the right to touch things deemed holy which the ordinary layman is forbidden to approach. The Greek name for a member of this class is *ιερευς*, but perhaps the corresponding Hebrew word would be more easily remembered by English people who are unacquainted with Greek. This word is *Cōhēn* (plural *Cōhānim*, just as the plural of *Cherub* is *Cherubim*) and it survives to-day

among the Jews as a surname. Jews with this surname are still recognized as descendants of those who once ministered at the altar in the Temple at Jerusalem, and to them, at all events until recent times, was conceded the right of giving in the synagogue the special benediction prescribed for Aaron and his sons in Numbers vi. 23-7.

In the days of the Temple at Jerusalem the *Cohanim* ministered at the altar; below them was an inferior order of ministers known as Levites; and at the head of them all, *Cohanim* and Levites, was one known as the "Great" or "Head *Cohen*." Thus in the Jewish Church there were four classes: (1) the Head *Cohen* who alone had the right once a year to enter into the Holy of Holies, (2) the *Cohanim* who ministered at the altar, (3) the Levites who performed duties not directly connected with the altar, and took part in the musical services, besides acting as doorkeeper and the like, (4) the laity generally. These four classes were at least in theory permanently separated, though in later times the office of Head *Cohen* was not always strictly hereditary. No mere Levite however could minister at the altar, nor could any mere layman perform those offices which were assigned to the Levites.

In the early days of the preaching of Christianity, as communities of Christian believers began to arise in various places, it gradually became necessary to provide some simple organization. Accordingly we read that the Apostles appointed in various Christian communities certain officials whose duty it was to arrange for, and preside at, meetings for worship, and in general to exercise care over the Christian community. The organization of these officials, however, was not copied from that of the Jewish Church. They were not called by any name corresponding to *Cohanim*, but they were styled *elders*, or, to use the English word derived from the Greek for elders, *presbyters*, and also *overseers* (from the Greek word from which our English word *bishop* is derived). In the New Testament there is no difference of order between *elders* (i.e., *presbyters*) and *overseers* (i.e., *bishops*), both words being applied to the same people. In course of time, however, the terms *overseer* or *bishop* came to be limited to the head of the elders in one locality, while the term *presbyters* continued to be used for those who presided over, and had the charge of, the various congregations: below these being a class of *deacons*, ministers or attendants.

From the word *presbyter* is derived by shortening the English word *priest*, which therefore means merely an *elder*. It will be remembered that when the older form of the word, viz., *presbyter*, was revived in the seventeenth century, John Milton complained that "new presbyter was but old priest writ large." The word *priest* is therefore a *Christian* word, and it does not correspond either to the Greek word *ἑρετης* or to the Hebrew word *Cohen*. It would be felt incongruous if Caiaphas were described as "Archbishop of Jerusalem," or if John the Baptist's father were styled "Canon Zacharias"; but it would not be one whit more incongruous than calling them, as we are accustomed to do, *priests*. It

is most unfortunate that our English translation of the Bible, having no English equivalent of *Cohen* and *ἱερεὺς*, translated them by the Christian word *priest*, which does not correspond to them. It would have been infinitely better if they had kept the Hebrew or Greek word, just as they kept the Hebrew words *Cherubim* and *Seraphim*.

It was perhaps almost inevitable in an uncritical age that, after the evolution of a Christian organized ministry, men who regarded the Old Testament as virtually on a level with the New, should compare the orders of the Christian ministry with those of the Jewish; but such confusion has been intensified in England by our translation of the Bible. The result of the misapplication of this Christian word *priest*, i.e., *elder* to *Cohanim*, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, has led to endless confusion, and in many cases has helped to confirm the assumption that the ministry of the Jewish Temple provided a model of the Christian ministry; though the two are entirely distinct. Thus the order of Deacons has been equated with that of the Levites. A beautiful Latin hymn written in the twelfth century calls S. Stephen a *Levite*. In Wilburton Church there is a monument of a former Archdeacon of Ely on which he is described as an *Arch-Levite*. Unfortunately the mischief did not stop there: the office of the Christian elder, i.e., priest, was confounded with that of the Jewish *Cohen*, and the former was regarded not as the *elder* delegated to preside over a congregation, but as having after his ordination as an *elder* certain virtually miraculous powers inherent in him, which he did not possess before his ordination. THE MINISTRY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH HAS NOTHING WHATEVER TO DO WITH THE MINISTRY OF THE TEMPLE, and it recognizes as its supreme Pastor and Overseer One Who in the days of His flesh was a *layman*, and Who neither claimed the right to go up to the one legitimate altar at Jerusalem, nor would have obtained the concession of such a right if He had claimed it. And when this is recognized, we shall be in a position to understand the first passage which I have taken for my text, wherein it is said of Christ that He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests (i.e., not *presbyters*) but *Cohanim*, *ἱερεῖς*, to His God and Father.

What would an early Christian understand if he were told that he was made a *ἱερεὺς* or *Cohen*? No Jewish Christian would suppose for an instant that he was called to offer *sacrifice*, nor would a Gentile Christian, being admitted into a community in which there was no sacrifice, so understand it. He would, I think, associate with the office of a *Cohen* two main ideas. In the first place, the *Cohen* had direct access to things holy: in the second place, he was constituted mediator between God and those who were unconscious of possessing such right of access. We need not shrink from affirming that in these two respects all Christian believers, not merely the clergy, are *Cohanim*. Every one who accepts the Gospel message has a right of access to God—access more direct and intimate than that of the Head *Cohen* in the Temple: for

our Saviour has taught us to pray "Our Father," and what nearer relation to God could we have than that of His own dear children?

Further, we are mediators between God and those who do not know Him or are alienated from Him. Do not distort the meaning of that verse, "There is one God, one Mediator also between God and men, Himself man Christ Jesus," so as to repudiate what is alike your right and your duty. Every missionary, layman or cleric, is a mediator, or if you prefer it, an ambassador, between God and those who do not know Him. But the object of the Christian mediator is to establish direct communication between those to whom he takes God's message and God. He is not in place of God, but is a minister by whom is brought the saving Gospel of the love of God.

We then, all of us, as well as the blessed company of all faithful people elsewhere, are *Cohanim*, having right of direct access to God, and charged with a message to deliver to those who know not God: and thus we all, clergy and laity alike, possess a dignity in itself greater than that of those who are set apart for the better maintenance of order and discipline in the Church. I was ordained thirty-nine years ago to the office of a priest, i.e., a presbyter or elder, but before that I was a *Cohen*. I am not a *Cohen* like the *Cohanim* of Israel presiding over, and apart from, a community of laymen: I am an elder in a Church of *Cohanim*.

And if it be clearly understood in what sense it can be said of every single believer in the Gospel that he is a *Cohen*, we shall understand how our Saviour also comes to be so described. He has the right of direct access to the Holy of Holies—not like the Head *Cohen* in the Temple—only once a year, but always. We are not like the crowd who year by year waited in the Temple court in suspense to know whether the act of propitiation had been accepted, and whether the Head *Cohen* would return from the awful presence of God unscathed, for our Saviour is with us always even to the end of the world. His presence with God is an abiding proof that what in the Jewish Church was supposed to be accomplished on the Day of Atonement is for us in a fuller measure, and in a more spiritual sense, an eternal reality. The *effect* of the Head *Cohen's* intercession on the Day of Atonement was thought to be worn out by the time that the next Day of Atonement was celebrated: but the *effect* of what our Saviour has accomplished continues unchanged day by day and year by year. Not that He literally in His glorification makes intercession for us. There is no divergence between the will of the Father and the will of the Son, that the Son should endeavour to change the purpose of the Father. When the Apostle used the figure of the intercession of the mediating Head *Cohen* to illustrate the work of Christ, he was writing to Hebrew Christians who would understand that he had in mind not the *process* of the ritual of the Day of Atonement, but its supposed *effect*. It is through ignorance of Hebrew modes of speech that Christ has been represented as coaxing

the Father, reminding Him of His death—as though God could forget! The familiar words of Wesley's moving hymn,

" Still for us He intercedes,
His prevailing death He pleads,"

are due to a misunderstanding of the meaning of Scripture, and we should do well to discontinue their use, and to seek to set forth the work of our salvation in words more directly suitable to men and women of our own race and language. The truth remains unchanged, though the metaphor by which it was once expressed to Hebrew Christians has ceased to be easily understood. That which the Apostle, writing to Jews, illustrated from the ritual of the Temple, can be made clear in these days without going so far for an illustration. Christ is our elder Brother Who, in His perfect knowledge of the Father's love for us men, came and by His life and death and resurrection preached peace to those who were very far off as well as to those who were much nearer. Christ's charge to Mary Magdalene may be applied to every individual Christian in every age: "Go unto my brethren and say unto them, I am ascended unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God"—it being always remembered that the glorification of our Saviour is no bar to our communion with Him, for lo, He is with us everywhere and always, even unto the end of the world.

JUDGES. (PROLEGOMENA.) By Rev. Charles E. Jackson, M.A.,
Rector of Longnewton, Durham. *London: A. H. Stockwell,
Ltd. 2s. net.*

This little manual consists of a short Introduction to the story of the troublous times when the Judges ruled in the land, and it contains some notes—the work of a scholar—on the two opening chapters of the book.

THE GREATEST BOOK IN LITERATURE. By F. E. Marsh, D.D.
London: Hulberts, Ltd.

Dr. Marsh's output is simply prodigious, and we happen to know that it is not an exaggeration when we say that millions of his helps to Bible study and understanding have been circulated and still they continue in great demand. His two volumes of Bible Readings are a treasure store for preachers and teachers. This latest volume from his busy pen consists of Lectures delivered to the students in The Missionary Institute, Nyack, New York. Like all Dr. Marsh's work, these studies are orderly and lucid and they cover a great deal of ground, and considering the size and price of the book (2s.), it contains a large amount of suggestive material. We very cordially commend it to our readers.

S. R. C.