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THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

by A. GELSTON

THIS study in the exegesis of Rev. 1: 6; 5: 10; 20: 6 was originally prepared to be presented to a conference held by the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research at Tyndale House, Cambridge. The author is Pusey and Ellerton Hebrew Scholar in the University of Oxford.

THREE times in the Apocalypse we find an allusion to the status of Christians as kings and priests. The incidental nature of the allusions shows that the idea seems to have been taken for granted by the writer. Presumably it is derived from an application of Exodus 19 : 6 to the Christian Church as the new Israel—such an application as is to be found in I Peter 2 : 9 with other Old Testament allusions in a passage which Selwyn thinks derives from a Christian hymn. But to trace the probable derivation of this phrase is not to establish its meaning. Does the description of the Christians as a kingdom mean no more than that they have been admitted into the Kingdom of God? Or does it define their relation to the world? Again, is the priesthood of all Christian people merely their character as a body of worshippers, or does it indicate some mediatorial office in relation to the world? These are the questions which this study sets out to discuss, and the method adopted will be first to attempt an exegesis of the verses in which the phrase occurs, and then to examine the results of the exegesis in the light of a wider Biblical background.

I.

The foundation text is to be found in Exodus 19 : 5-6. The context is highly significant. God has just brought His people out of Egypt and called them to meet Him at the wilderness of Sinai. Moses goes up into the mount and receives a divine summons to go and propose to the waiting people the terms of a covenant. Yahweh, who has redeemed them from their enemies and brought them to Himself, is offering them the privilege of becoming a peculiar treasure to Him: “. . . ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation”. On their part, if this status is to be established, they must keep Yahweh's covenant and obey His voice. The sequel shows how

the people accepted the covenant and Yahweh proceeded to reveal to them some of His commandments. Then the covenant was solemnly ratified.

We must now look a little more closely at the terms used here of the new community of God's own people. They are to be His "peculiar treasure" (Heb. *segullah*). This word is used in the Old Testament almost exclusively of Israel as God's people. It means a valued property, which God has chosen and taken to Himself. It is further defined by "from among (or with the R.V. margin, 'above') all peoples". Israel is to become a national entity among the nations of the world, but is to stand in a unique relation to God, different in kind from that of any other nation. The idea is interpreted in Deuteronomy 26: 19 as "high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour". Later in Malachi 3: 16-17 it is significantly limited to "them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name". The stress then of this word lies in the unique relation to God of Israel as compared with all other nations in the world.

The people of God are further defined as a "kingdom of priests". The Hebrew (*mamleketh kohanim*) here uses the construct state, showing that the phrase forms a single idea. It might mean a kingdom whose subjects are all priests or it might mean a sovereignty exercised by priests. The word kingdom might mean that Israel was to be a nation ruled by a king, presumably Yahweh Himself — a kingdom among the kingdoms of the world. Or it might mean that they were to be a sovereignty over the nations. The latter meaning is probably not that of the text. For one thing the word in this sense is generally abstract, and for another the context suggests the first meaning as a parallel to "nation". But the idea of the second meaning may not be altogether absent from the context. The peculiar treasure is from among or above all peoples, and is in a specially close relationship to the God of all the earth. Israel is as it were a royal people among the nations.

It is interesting that the versions divide the notions. The Syriac adds the copula, thus giving a text like that of Rev. 2: 10 — "a kingdom and priests". The LXX presents the two nouns not in a genitival relation but in apposition. It might be argued that the LXX *basileion hierateuma* is really an adjective and a noun, but Selwyn's arguments in favour of *basileion* being a noun are strong. Particularly convincing is the normal use of the word in the adaptations of this verse in II Maccabees 2: 17 and Philo, *de Sobr.* lxvi. These distinctions are not of great importance, but

the construct in the Hebrew suggests that the two terms define the same relationship. If the kingdom is Israel as ruled by God, the priesthood is probably one of worship; but if Israel stands in a royal relation to the nations the likelihood is that the priestly office is mediatorial.

Finally Israel is to be a holy nation. This adds nothing to what has already been said but reiterates that Israel is to be a nation among the nations of the world, yet distinguished by her specially close relationship to Yahweh. For the essence of holiness is being set apart to God. Just as priests, Levites, prophets and Nazirites are called holy because they are set apart for the service of God in a special degree above the ordinary people, so Israel is to be holy because she is set apart to serve God and to stand in a special relationship to Him more than any nation.

Such in outline is the meaning of Exodus 19: 5-6. Israel is to be a nation peculiarly God's own, its members are to be priests, and its special vocation raises it above all the other peoples of the world. Further light may be gained from Isaiah lxi. 6: "But ye shall be named the priests of the Lord: men shall call you the ministers of our God: ye shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves". Here there are two ideas. First Israel is to be the priesthood of the world. Secondly Israel is to be maintained by the material wealth of the other peoples, just as within Israel the ordinary people maintained by their tithe the priest and Levite. But is there not here a suggestion of royalty in the relation of Israel to the nations? Perhaps we have here no more than a further application of the characterization of Israel as the priests of the world, but it is tempting to see a development of the royalty which we suggested was latent in the Exodus passage. In any case this verse provided a model for later exegesis of the Exodus passage on these lines.

Such an exegesis seems to have been in the minds of the LXX translators of Exodus 19. The word *basileion* is discussed by Selwyn, who points out that it never seems to be equivalent to *basileia*, the normal word in the New Testament for the Kingdom of God. In the LXX it is used for "sovereignty" or "monarchy" or "palace". In II Maccabees 2: 17 it means the "institution of monarchy" and Philo uses it of the King's palace. From this would appear that *basileion* in the LXX of Exodus might well be an interpretation of *mamleketh*, bringing out the sense of sovereignty. On the other hand if it were intended to translate *mamleketh* as "kingdom", the use of *basileion* would be unparalleled.

Before we go on to consider the use of our phrase in the New Testament it is worth pausing to develop the implications of the use of the construct state in the Exodus passage. We have already indicated the close relationship of the two conceptions and it is pertinent to remember that there was a persistent tradition in Israel which thought of the secular and religious leadership as ideally in the same hands. The priest-king is by no means a stranger to the Old Testament, and while we cannot embark on a full discussion of the concept, it will be of interest briefly to recall the main instances.

Any survey of this theme must begin with Melchizedek. In Genesis 14: 18 he appears as king of Jerusalem and priest of El Elyon; he comes out to meet Abram on his return from the slaughter of the kings, bringing bread and wine for the succour of the warriors, blessing Abram by his God and praising God who had given the victory. Abram thereupon gave him a tithe of the spoils and captives. In Ps. 110 Melchizedek appears again. A king of Israel, perhaps the ideal king or Messiah, is addressed not only as a king sitting at God's right hand till all his enemies submit to him, but also as a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. If, as seems probable, this is an indication that the division of the royal and priestly offices was felt to be contrary to the ideal, it is highly significant that in Zechariah 6: 13 it is said of the Branch "he shall be a priest upon his throne". It is only fair to add that the text can equally well be rendered "there shall be a priest by his throne", but the ideal unity is still to be seen in the following "and the counsel of peace shall be between them both".

But there are indications that this unity of the priestly and royal offices was more than ideal. Saul offered sacrifice (I Samuel 13: 9). David's sons and one Ira the Jairite were priests (II Samuel 8: 18, 20: 26; cf. also I Kings 4: 5), unless indeed the word here has a technical sense divorced from the ordinary idea of priesthood. Jeroboam I offered incense in person at Bethel (I Kings 12: 33), as did Uzziah in Jerusalem (II Chronicles 26: 16). After the close of the Old Testament the tradition was to appear in actuality again in the form of the Hasmonean dynasty.

II.

We are now in position to examine the application of our phrase to the Christian Church in the New Testament. The clearest instance is in I Peter 2: 9, "But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, . . .". This is a clear application of the Exodus passage,

with phrases also from Isaiah 43: 20-21, to the Church as the new Israel, the inheritor of the privileges and vocation forfeited by the old Israel. Thus even the word "nation" is applied to the Church (though it might be thought inappropriate) because its use in the Exodus context defines it as people marked off from the rest of humanity in a special relation to God. The Church consists of those whom God has chosen out of the world to form a holy people for Himself, and they constitute a *basileion hierateuma*. This phrase is quoted in exactly the wording of the LXX of Exodus, unlike the passages in Revelation. What is the meaning of *basileion* here? We have already seen that the word never seems to be used for a kingdom. At first sight one would be inclined so to take it here; it would then form one of a series of near-synonyms for the body of Christians, each being characterized by a different epithet. The Church would be a group of people elect, priestly, holy, and for God's own possession. But this pattern will not bear closer examination. The first and third epithets are adjectives, the last an adjectival phrase, and the second in which we are specially interested a noun in apposition. This grammatical relationship would suggest that *basileion* is more than a peg for *hierateuma*. It might of course be argued that *basileion* is an adjective. But, as Selwyn points out, the testimony of II Maccabees and Philo to the current exegesis of the Exodus passage as well as the grammatical irregularity of the adjective preceding the noun are strong objections to such an interpretation. If then we take *basileion* as a noun, what sense should we give it? Selwyn suggests the meaning "palace" attested by Philo's use of the Exodus passage and picking up the "spiritual house" of verse 5. But he oddly regards the epithet "spiritual" as a qualification of *basileion* four verses later, and in his reconstruction of the hymn which he supposes to have been the immediate source of our phrase in this passage the "spiritual house" does not occur. May it not be that the sense of "sovereignty" is understood in the Christian adaptation of the phrase? We believe that the use of it in two of the passages in Revelation is conclusive evidence that it was so understood there, and would argue that the incidental nature of the allusions in that book is strong evidence that the application of the phrase to the Christian Church was a commonplace, and that its interpretation there is evidence for its interpretation in I Peter where there is insufficient evidence in the context to determine the sense. We shall proceed now to a study of the relevant passages in the Revelation taking note of their use of the phrase, and observing how the context defines the interpretation.

(a) Rev. 1: 5-6. "Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

Our phrase here occurs in parenthesis in a doxology. The larger context cannot therefore help us in our exegesis. But the immediate context of the doxology itself is not without significance. It opens with a reference to our redemption—a remarkable parallel to the context in Exodus. It goes on to describe the present status of the redeemed—again an exact parallel to the Exodus passage. This would seem sufficient to prove dependence on the Exodus passage even though the actual phraseology differs from the LXX of that passage. Indeed the writer is not consistent in his formulation of the phrase, and the variants are probably not of great importance. The word for "kingdom" here is *basileia*, a more common form than the cognate *basileion*. This word can easily mean a "kingdom" as a political entity, but it can also be used of sovereignty or royal rule, as e.g. in Luke 19: 12, 15 where in the parable of the pounds the man travels to receive his royal status. Again in Revelation 17: 18 we hear of the great city which has royal status over the kings of the earth. There is nothing in this passage to indicate in which sense it should be taken, but we may safely interpret in the light of the other passages. The substitution of *hiereis* for *hierateuma* is probably not of any great significance. Perhaps the most important feature of this passage is the nature of the context; the writer can so readily assume his readers' familiarity with the Christian application of the Exodus phrase that he incorporates it in his opening doxology.

(b) Rev. 5: 9-10. "And they sing a new song, saying, Worthy art thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation, and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests; and they reign upon the earth."

Here again the general context cannot give us much help. This doxology occurs in the worship of heaven after the Lamb has taken the book from the Father's hand. It is sung by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders and celebrates the redeeming work of the Lamb. We may notice again the parallel to the Exodus context. The words *basileia* and *hiereis* are used as in 1: 6 and the copula is inserted as in the Syriac of Exodus. But we have a most interesting addition in the final words, indicating that *basileia* is here at least understood in an active sense; the redeemed reign

on the earth. Some mss. read the future of the verb, but the present is almost certainly right as it is the harder reading, and as the other is probably due to assimilation to 20 : 6. We have then the sense that the Christian Church in this age enjoys a sovereignty over the world, a sense we have suggested as underlying Jewish and Christian exegesis of the Exodus passage, and a sense which we hope to illustrate with other passages not directly using our phrase.

(c) Rev. 20: 6. "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection ; over these the second death hath no power ; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years."

This passage is more integrally related to its context than the other two. It is a freer allusion to the wording of Exodus but clearly picks up the meaning of both the words. It adds several features of interest. Like the last passage it interprets the kingdom in an active sense : those who partake of the first resurrection will reign with Christ. The last phrase is a new qualification. They are in fact to share in Christ's divine sovereignty over the world, for it is difficult to envisage any other sphere for the exercise of this sovereignty. Moreover this reign is clearly stated to be a thing of the future, unlike the present reign of 5 : 10, and it is to last through the millennium. It is limited to those who share in the first resurrection, i.e. the Christian martyrs. All these details are peculiar to this passage, and suggest that what we have here is not a full exegesis of the implications of the Exodus passage for the Church, but a particular illustration of the royal priesthood of Christians as enjoyed in a special degree by those particular Christians. The limited application of this verse must not be allowed to exclude the more fundamental application of this privilege to all Christians as in the first two allusions. The great value of this passage for our purpose is its evidence that the kingdom was understood actively as a sovereignty enjoyed by the Church over the world.

While we are still in the Revelation it is worth while noticing another recurrence of our theme in 22: 3-5. The phraseology is again an indirect reference. The context is a description of the new Jerusalem and the heavenly life there. Two of the phrases are relevant for our purpose : "his servants shall do him service . . . and they shall reign for ever and ever." The word for doing service (*latreuein*) is used of worship in the LXX, not particularly of priestly ministering (which is generally *leitourgein*) but of the worship of the people as a whole. But the second phrase, which is incidentally the close of the description of the heavenly Jerusalem, shows that the sovereignty of the saints with Christ is regarded as

an eternal privilege. As a picture of the life of heaven from our sight, the last image is that of the people of God reigning to all eternity.

If our exegesis is right we must expect to find indications in the New Testament at large that the idea of the Christians as a royal priesthood was not strange but an accepted fact. Such indications we believe are to be found, and we now proceed to draw them out. We shall concentrate chiefly on the royal status of Christians amid the peoples of the world and then add a brief note on the evidence for their being a mediatorial priesthood.

III.

We saw that there was an undercurrent of royalty in the depictions of the status of Israel in the passages in Exodus and Isaiah. In Deuteronomy 15 : 6 we find this idea explicitly brought out: "thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over thee". This might be a commentary on Israel as a royal people; it illustrates the significance of royalty in the ancient world. The slave and the king stood at opposite ends of the social scale. The slave had no independence of will or of livelihood; the king not only had both but he could impose his will on his subjects and was entitled to be maintained at their expense. Thus the king was the freeman *par excellence*. In the passage we have just quoted it is just these aspects of kingship which are applied to Israel among the nations, and that passage supports the suggestion made above that the Isaiah development of the Exodus passage was partly on these lines. The same idea is to be found in Daniel 7 : 18, 27 to which we shall have occasion to refer later. These verses run: "But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever And the kingdom and the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High: his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him". The word for "kingdom" in the LXX here is *basileia*, the same as is used in Revelation 1 : 6 and 5 : 10, and there is here no doubt as to its meaning. Moreover the rule of the saints is identified with that of the Most High, for it is everlasting. In Daniel 4 : 32 we read that "the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will".

What then is the evidence that the Christians regarded this sovereignty of Israel among the nations as transferred to themselves? In Romans 5 : 17 the Christian is said to reign in life in contrast to the death of sin. But while we probably have here the

use of the contrast between slavery and royalty to illustrate the status of a Christian, there seems to be no reference in this passage to any sovereignty over the world. I Corinthians 4: 8 is more suggestive. The apostle is speaking ironically: the Corinthian Christians regarded themselves as so gifted that they could boast independence of the apostle. "Already are ye filled, already ye are become rich, ye have reigned without us: yea and I would that ye did reign, that we also might reign with you". Does this not suggest that there is a proper royal independence of Christians, the absence of which St. Paul laments in his converts? In 6: 2 of the same epistle we are told that that "the saints shall judge the world". Does not this suggest that Christians have a royal status over the world?

More explicit evidence is to be found in logia of the Lord to the twelve: Matthew 19: 28, "ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel"; and Luke 22: 29-30, "I appoint unto you a kingdom, even as my Father appointed unto me, that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and ye shall sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel". This seems to indicate, like the passage in Daniel, a sharing in the divine kingdom rather than any independent sovereignty. But the rule of the apostles is not in question, even though it be here limited in sphere to Israel. For the extension of this principle to sovereignty over the world at large we may compare the passage just quoted from I Corinthians and Romans 15: 27, "For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, they owe it to them also to minister unto them in carnal things". The immediate reference of this verse is to the support of the Jerusalem Church by Gentile Christians. But the underlying idea seems to reflect the idea of Israel as sovereign among the nations.

Does not this idea throw new light on some familiar passages? Some of the beatitudes speak of those who in this age are poor and are persecuted for righteousness' sake, those who in fact share Christ's humiliation in this world, as having their positions in the world gloriously reversed when they will share in the divine sovereignty (Matt. 5: 3, 10; Luke 6: 20). The sovereignty or kingdom of God is theirs. Surely this means more than that they will have a place in God's kingdom; they will share in Christ's reign as they have shared in His humiliation. Cf. the phrase in II Timothy 2: 12, which is often thought to be part of an early Christian hymn: "if we endure, we shall also reign with him". Cf.

also James 2: 5, "did not God choose them that are poor as to the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to them that love him?" The same idea seems to underlie Luke 12: 31-2, "seek ye his kingdom, and these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom". Far from being destitute as a result of putting first the interests of God's kingdom, we shall be given the status of kings. The idea needs to be balanced by the Lord's teaching on true greatness and the royalty of service, and on the necessity of receiving the Kingdom in the spirit of a child (Luke 18: 17; Mark 10: 42-5). But there seems to be no doubt that Christians are to be thought of as having royal status in the world.

There are a few other passages in the New Testament which bear witness to the same idea, and we will briefly allude to them. In I Thessalonians 2: 12 we are told that God calls us into his own kingdom and glory, and in II Thessalonians 1: 5-10 the Christians are to be recompensed at the Second Coming for their sufferings on behalf of the Kingdom by a share in that Kingdom and in the rest and glory of the Lord Jesus. Ephesians 2: 6 tells us that God raised us up with Christ, "and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places" thus sharing His sovereignty and glory. Hebrews 12: 28 connects the idea of receiving the Kingdom (the verb *paralambanein* is that used in the LXX of the Daniel passage quoted above) with the worship of God (where the verb *latreuein* is the same as in Revelation 22: 3) as two aspects of the Christian life. Finally we may return to the Revelation where in 1: 9 the writer introduces himself as "your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus". If we interpret the kingdom here in the same way as we have in these other passages we have an enhanced contrast with the tribulation and endurance. For the contrast of royalty with *hypomone* we may compare II Timothy 2: 12 quoted above; for the contrast with *thlipsis* Acts 14: 22, "through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God". For the latter we may also compare John 16: 33, "In the world ye have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world".

IV.

If then we may take it as established that the kingdom of the Christians is a real sovereignty over the world, a share in the sovereignty of Christ, what are we to say of their priesthood? Has that too any relation to the world? That the Church is a worshipping community all are agreed; this aspect therefore of the priest-

hood of all believers will be but lightly touched upon here. Our question is whether Christians have any share in the mediatorial priesthood of Christ, as they have in His divine rule, and if so what is the nature of their share in it.

The Epistle to the Hebrews develops the theme of our Lord's death as the fulfilment of both the priesthood and sacrifices of the Old Covenant, with a special interest in atonement for sin. The sacrificial death of Christ is there declared to be once for all and all-sufficient so that "there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins". But the offering of sacrifice to atone for sin was not the whole of the function of the Levitical priesthood. There were other sacrifices signifying thanksgiving, consecration, and fellowship with God. The New Testament counterpart to these is to be found in the various spiritual sacrifices to be offered by Christians of which we append a few examples with references: praise, Hebrews 13: 15; alms, Hebrews 13: 16; faith, Philippians 2: 17; and ourselves, Romans 6: 13; 12: 1. This is one aspect of Christian priesthood. This doubtless is the *latreia* which we have noticed in one or two passages.

But the Levitical priesthood had two other mediatorial functions beside that of propitiatory sacrifice, viz. intercession and teaching. May it not be that these two Christian functions are an expression of the priesthood which we inherit from Israel of old? In I Timothy 2: 1ff. St. Paul directs that prayers and thanks be made for all men (the preposition is *hyper*). This is surely mediatorial intercession. The Apostle proceeds to direct that the scope be wide; particularly those in authority are to be upheld by prayers, although they be not Christians. This prayer is to be made to a God who wills the salvation of all men, and we know from experience that God graciously allows His people to co-operate in the salvation of men by their intercessory prayers. Such intercession in no way impairs the uniqueness of Christ's mediatorial work; He and He alone can make atonement for sin. But He honours His own by allowing them this part in His mediatorial work as a whole.

Similarly in evangelism. In II Corinthians 5: 19-20 St. Paul points out how God has committed to His Church the ministry of reconciliation. The image he uses is that of an ambassador; but the thought is not far removed from the sphere of mediatorial priesthood. The Church is to intreat men to be reconciled to God; this work of evangelism no less than that of intercession is a share in the mediatorial work of Christ. St. Paul himself uses the metaphor of priesthood for evangelism in Romans 15: 16 when he speaks

of the grace given him by God, "that I should be a minister (*leitourgos*) of Christ Jesus unto the Gentiles, ministering (*hierourgounta*) the Gospel of God, that the offering up (*prophora*) of the Gentiles might be made acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost". Thus we have Pauline authority for regarding the work of evangelism as a work of priestly mediation, and a share in the priesthood of our Lord.

This brings us to the end of our study. We have sought to trace in the history of the exegesis of Exodus 19: 6 a line of interpretation that made Israel a royal people and a priestly body among the nations of the world. This conception we believe to have been transferred to the Christian Church. That this is the sense in which the early Christians understood the phrase we believe to be demonstrated by its use in the Apocalypse, and corroborated by traces of the same idea in New Testament passages which do not make direct use of the verse in Exodus. Just as Israel was redeemed from Egypt and made a royal priesthood, so we by the grace of God in Christ have been redeemed from slavery to sin and death and made a royal priesthood. We are privileged to share in our Master's mediatorial work and glorious reign, and to all eternity we shall be privileged thus to stand in close relationship with God, *cui servire regnare est*.

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