

# **Priesthood and apostolic ministry**

**Paper in view of the 2012 meeting of the Catholic-Messianic dialogue  
(Castel Gandolfo 26-30.08)**

Has Messianic Judaism (later MJ) something to learn from the Catholic understanding of apostolic ministry? Does the current or virtual reflection of MJ on priesthood have any relevance for the Catholic Church (later CC)? Since the ecclesiological origins of MJ lie in the Evangelical/Pentecostal movement, it is hardly a surprising fact that the former's approach to ordained ministry appears to be heavily indebted to the theology of the latter. From this point of view, the relevance of having Catholic and Messianic theologians assess this particular topic does not strike one as obvious. In this matter, the roots of a number of disagreements lie far beyond the Messianic Movement, and even the Evangelical one. They reflect the fundamental split which occurred in the 16th century between the Catholic Church and the Reformation as a whole. Accordingly, would it not be more fruitful to conduct a dialogue between "ordinary" Catholic and Protestant theologians who, besides mastering the doctrinal coherence of their own confession, have become, in the course of centuries, more familiar with the inner logic of their long-standing rival's views on the subject? Is an original resolution to be expected from Catholic and Jewish Messianic theologians discussing the notion of apostolic ministry?

True, if the theoretical foundations of the CC's understanding of priesthood are not immune to further questioning, they appear to be solidly defined, carved in stone, as it were, by more than a millennium-old Church discipline, provided one takes the Gregorian Reform as a starting-point. However, this is not the case of MJ. Ensuring the doctrinal coherence of a Jewish approach to Jesus-discipleship still appears to be a daunting task. Who is able to predict the theological shape that MJ will have ten years from now? Accordingly, it is the self-differentiating process of MJ, its endeavor to express its own theological views, independently of its Evangelical and, more widely, Protestant matrix, that provides value and interest to its

dialogue with Catholic theologians on the issue of priesthood. Could a perennial Catholic understanding help MJ to reach a better awareness of what is to become its own approach to apostolic ministry?

That it can follow, in my opinion, from the Jewish dimension of MJ. It comes, I shall argue, as a consequence of the Jewish tradition's inner logic. This is not the only point I would like to make in the lines that follow, though. As I try to establish a bridge between Messianic pastoral leadership and the Catholic understanding of priesthood, I will contend that this discussion entails reconsidering the ecclesiological relationship between CC and MJ. Indeed, it is my conviction that, to a non-negligible extent, the future of the Church of Christ depends on the possibility of understanding and actualizing this relationship.

### **1. Rabbinic structure vs. sacramental priesthood**

The fact that the current status and role of Messianic rabbis have much more in common with those of Protestant pastors than with those of Catholic priests can be explained by a number of reasons. The historical origins of MJ as well as the ecclesiology of the movement are significant factors. However, there is little doubt that the convergence between the Protestant understanding of pastoral ministry and the Jewish perception of the role of the rabbi within the congregation has played a major role in the self-organization of a religious movement that claims to "restore the Jewishness of the Gospel"<sup>1</sup>. Fundamentally, it is from the congregation, understood in a "local", non-hierarchic sense, that pastor and rabbis receive their authority, since it is for the service of such a congregation that they are ordained and given a mission of oversight. In contrast, it is from the Church hierarchy that a Catholic priest receives his authority over a local congregation, an authority that this hierarchy claims to have received from Christ himself<sup>2</sup>. Pastors and rabbis are not clerics, according to the Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. The title of D. H. Stern's book, *Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel: A Message for Christians Condensed from Messianic Judaism*, Lederer Books, USA [1988].

<sup>2</sup> This aspect is clearly laid out by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "1552. The ministerial priesthood has the task not only of representing Christ - Head of the Church - before the assembly of the faithful, but also of acting in the name of the whole Church when presenting to God the prayer of the Church, and above all when offering the Eucharistic sacrifice. 1553. 'In the name of the whole Church' does not mean that priests are the delegates of the community. The prayer and offering of the Church are inseparable from the prayer and offering of Christ, her head; it is always the case that Christ worships in and through his Church. The whole Church, the Body of Christ,

understanding of the term; they do not constitute a class of people that would be fundamentally different from “lay people”<sup>3</sup> – hence the possibility of taking on ministry only for a limited period, the “model role” devoted to pastors and rabbis as to married life and the conduct of family affairs, etc. All this stands in sharp contrast to the sacramental aura of Catholic priesthood, the representatives of which remain iconic figures of lifetime commitment and celibacy in the western Christian world<sup>4</sup>.

Of course, the type of ministry that a non-Messianic rabbi is asked to exert for his congregation is very different, in many respects, from that of his Protestant equivalent, although one can legitimately draw a number of parallels between the two<sup>5</sup>.

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prays and offers herself ‘through him, with him, in him’, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, to God the Father. The whole Body, caput et membra, prays and offers itself, and therefore those who in the Body are especially his ministers are called ministers not only of Christ, but also of the Church. It is because the ministerial priesthood represents Christ that it can represent the Church”, text <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/>.

<sup>3</sup> Let us quote a few lines from the article “Rabbi” in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*: “Frankel thus expresses this principle: ‘In Judaism there is no power endowed with the right to bind and to loose; there are no clergymen who by higher inspiration stand above the laymen; but only teachers, who expound the Law and give information thereof’ (*Jahresbericht des Breslauer Seminars*, 1860, p. xviii.). Geiger observes: ‘The practical theologian [rabbi, minister, or priest] holds among the Jews the position of moral influence appropriate to him. Neither as priest, by his ordination, nor as officer, by the material power of the state, is he entitled to interfere in the direction of religious affairs; but only through his knowledge, through the call he receives from the congregation, and through being imbued with the spirit, is he so entitled and is he furthermore the custodian of the eternal contents, of the transient history, and of the further development, of Judaism; as such he is entitled to a more authoritative voice than others. As little as he is a master, so little he is a mere servant’ (Geiger, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, ii. 27)”, text <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Gale’s *Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World* describes the shift operated by the Reformation in the following manner: “First of all, Martin Luther stripped away the theological rationale for the ritual and legal separateness of the clergy. Spiritual people, he argued in 1520, were not a separate class of mortals, ritually set apart by their orders; indeed, ordination was not a sacrament. Priestly celibacy was unnecessary, ungodly, and unrealistic. The legal immunities that protected the clergy from secular law and taxation were unjustified and should be removed. A priest was simply the representative of the community appointed and chosen to lead its spiritual life. Secondly, the core theology of the Reformation shifted the emphasis in church ministry away from the sacraments and ritual ministrations toward preaching, teaching, and moral discipline. The abolition of private masses, celebrated in vast profusion in the churches, colleges, and chantries of the later Middle Ages, drastically reduced the number of clergy needed to conduct worship. A whole class of clerical proletariat effectively disappeared. In most Protestant countries, the clerical elite, including monks and friars as well as secular collegiate priests and canons of chapters, was either completely abolished or at least much reduced in size (for instance in England). The Reformation church required a less numerous, well-trained cadre of preaching ministers in the parishes. They were to be supervised by a small class of superintendents, whether committees or individuals, and whether called bishops or not. They were to be educated by their intellectual leaders in the universities and academies”, art. “Clergy”, text <http://www.gale.cengage.com>.

<sup>5</sup> The influence of the Germanic, Protestant world on the formation and mindset of modern Jewish rabbis is quite obvious: “The modern rabbi (...) though trained to some extent in the halakic literature, is as a rule no longer expected, except in extraordinary cases and in matters concerning marriage or divorce, to decide ritualistic

In addition, the status of a rabbi and that of a pastor appear to be essentially different when they are put into historical perspective. From the start, the Reformation has endowed pastors with a status and a role that were conceived in opposition to the Catholic accepted understanding of priesthood. This explicitly non-Roman Catholic ("Papist") configuration of apostolic ministry is among the founding elements of the Reformation. The Jewish perspective on rabbinic order stands out as vastly different. The first point that needs to be mentioned is that the Jewish world lived for a long time without rabbis. The title is hardly met before the time of Jesus. It appears in connection with knowledge of the law, the tasks of governing a local community and rendering judicial judgment. The term "nasi" was used then as a synonym. Gamaliel "the elder" (Acts 5, 34 and sq.), as the most prominent member of the Sanhedrin at the time of Jesus, was called rabbi in this sense<sup>6</sup>. But any teacher whose disciples became in turn masters of other disciples could be called rabbi, as the example of Jesus himself shows. Until then, the central figures of the Jewish religious world were not rabbis, but priests and Levites. As is well-known, priests were associated with the rites and sacrifices in the Temple, not with tasks of judicial or political governance. The prevailing role of rabbis,

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questions; but greater stress is laid upon his work as preacher and expounder of the tenets of Judaism, as supervisor and promoter of the educational and spiritual life of the congregation. In matters concerning ancient traditions and beliefs and the views and aims of modern culture he is looked to to reconcile the present with the past.... (see Jost, "Neuere Gesch. der Israeliten," i. 98, 131, 214, 260, 365, 372-377; ii. 100, 169). As a matter of course, the example of the minister in the Church, especially in Protestant countries, exerted a great influence upon the function and position of the rabbi in the Synagogue; even upon his outward appearance, since the vestments of the Christian clergy, or their abandonment, have sometimes been copied by the modern rabbi, much to the chagrin of the followers of the tradition which prohibited the imitation of non-Jewish rites as "ḥuḳkat ha-goy" (see "Die Amtstracht der Rabbinen" in L. Löw's "Gesammelte Werke," iv. 216-234). Another function of the modern rabbi which follows the pastoral practice of the Christian minister is the offering of consolation and sympathy to persons or families in bereavement and distress, in forms perhaps more cheering and elevating than those formerly in use. Here, as well as in his pulpit and educational work, the modern rabbi has the opportunity of bringing the blessings of religion home to every individual in need of spiritual uplifting. He claims to have infused a new spirit and ardor into the divine service and other religious rites by his active participation therein; and in the communal work of charity and philanthropy he takes a conspicuous share. Modern life with its greater complexity and deeper problems has produced the new type of rabbi, possibly less ascetic and not so well versed in Hebrew lore, but more broad-minded, and more efficient in the direction of manifold activities in a larger field of usefulness", *Jewish Encyclopedia*, art. "Rabbi".

<sup>6</sup> See also, for example, the way the Gospel of John (3:1) presents Nicodemus: "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων)".

which accompanies the rise of a synagogal type of religion, as distinguished from Temple-worship, is a natural consequence of the destruction of the second Temple in 70 A.D.

Accordingly, one could say that as much as the status of pastors in the Protestant world is the product of a deliberate collective will, that of rabbis in the Jewish world bears witness to the unfortunate chain of events that deprived the nation of its forever unique centre of worship.

When it comes to MJ, the above considerations lead to the following questions. Should a movement that prides itself on its attachment to Jewish identity reassess its understanding of religious leadership, as it simultaneously claims to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and to comply with the teaching consigned in the books of the New Testament? Ought the discovery of Yeshua's messianity by Jewish theologians not induce them to reconsider the Protestant concept of apostolic ministry? Conversely, should they not rethink the status and role of the rabbinic function within the congregation in the light of their faith in Yeshua and that of the teachings transmitted by his first disciples?

For one thing, the founders of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation believed that their concept of apostolic ministry was in line with the whole teaching of Scriptures and their faith in Jesus-Christ. However, these theologians did not draw on the Jewish tradition the way MJ does. The continuity between the First and the Second Covenant did not lie at the core of their teaching, as it does in that of MJ. They could not therefore perceive the difference between the priestly figure associated with Temple worship and the status devolved to pastors, under the regime of the New Law, as a quintessential loss, witnessing the dire reality of exile, *Galut*. On the contrary, they would emphasize the superiority of the Word's power of salvation over the archaic, legalistic framework of Temple sacrifices. In this line, Papists were blamed for keeping to a Jewish, pre-Christian understanding of religion as they promoted a class of mediators between God and the simple faithful<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> "When we consider the obstinacy with which Romanists cling to their traditions, we can very well understand the zealous devotion of the Jews for the Law", Luther, *Commentary on the Galatians*, c.2, v.1. This continues to be the vulgate of the mainstream Protestant approach, cf. the article "Priesthood in the New Testament" from the *ISBE (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)*: "Though the intercessory supplication of believers on behalf of other persons has of late often been represented as a priestly act, as being, indeed, that activity which is essential to any real priesthood of believers, the New Testament thought is quite different, and is to be thus conceived: In ancient times it was held that men in general could not have direct access to God, that any approach to Him must

However, from the Jewish point of view, the system of priestly lineage never lost its fundamentally positive aura, even after the destruction of the Temple had *ipso facto* reduced it to a condition of indefinite obsolescence. Those whose family names are supposed to bear the mark of the ancient priestly (Cohens and cognates) and Levitical lineages (Levi and cognates) are still given minor functions in synagogal services. They continue to transmit to the congregation the heart-breaking memory of a time when Israel unceasingly dwelled in the shadow of the Presence, being sanctified on a daily basis through the sacrifices offered in the Temple<sup>8</sup>. It comes therefore as no surprise that Jewish groups currently lobbying for rebuilding

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be mediated by some member of the class of priests, who alone could approach God, and who must accordingly be employed by other men to represent them before Him. This whole conception vanishes in the light of Christianity. By virtue of their relation to Christ all believers have direct approach to God, and consequently, as this right of approach was formerly a priestly privilege, priesthood may now be predicated of every Christian. That none needs another to intervene between his soul and God; that none can thus intervene for another; that every soul may and must stand for itself in personal relation with God—such are the simple elements of the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers”, text *BibleWorks 9* software ed.

<sup>8</sup> Orthodox and Conservative Judaism still prescribe specific liturgical roles, as well as a few legal duties, to *Kohanim* and *Leviim*. *Kohanim* are the first called up to read the Torah (*aliya*) during services. *Leviim* are called second. The most striking feature is certainly the blessings (*birkat Kohanim*) given to the assembly by the *Kohanim* and *Leviim* in succession towards the end of the synagogal service. *Kohanim* (having had their hands washed by the *Leviim*) and *Leviim* utter the words of the blessing with raised arms, fingers in a specific formation and faces totally covered with the traditional shawl of prayer (*tallit*). The Talmud mentions that the blessing used to be said after the sacrifice of the daily offering in the days of the Temple (Soṭah vii. 6; Tamid v. 1, vii. 2; Meg. 18a). The congregation is still summoned to avert the eyes from *Kohanim* and *Leviim* when the blessing is given. “The belief prevailed that during the lifting up of the hands by the priests, the Shekinah was hovering over their heads and its rays streamed through their open fingers, the people not being allowed to look on lest, like those who gazed at the sacred Ark in ancient times, they might be hurt, struck with dimness of the eyes and other misfortunes (Ḥag. 16a; Soṭah 39b; Yer. Meg. iv. 75c; Cant. R. ii. 9; Num. R. xi.; “Aruk,” s.v. ; see, however, Tosef., Ḥag. 16a; and Yer. Meg. l.c., for more rationalistic views regarding the time when the Name was no longer pronounced)”, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, art. “Birkat Kohanim”. Reformed Judaism, however, has stripped *Kohanim* and *Leviim* of these liturgical prerogatives, substituting for the blessing a conclusive prayer said by the rabbi. This goes together with the reconsideration of the place and memory of Temple-worship, cf. the following decisions made at the rabbinic conference of Philadelphia (1869): “3. The Aaronic priesthood and the Mosaic sacrificial cult were preparatory steps to the real priesthood of the whole people, which began with the dispersion of the Jews, and to the sacrifices of sincere devotion and moral sanctification, which alone are pleasing and acceptable to the Most Holy. These institutions, preparatory to higher religiosity, were consigned to the past, once for all, with the destruction of the Second Temple, and only in this sense—as educational influences in the past—are they to be mentioned in our prayers. 4. Every distinction between Aaronides and non-Aaronides, as far as religious rites and duties are concerned, is consequently inadmissible, both in the religious cult and in social life”. The contrast could not be sharper with the positions developed by Menachem HaKohen Risikoff, an orthodox rabbi, in 1938: “Today, we also are living through a time of flood, Not of water, but of a bright fire, which burns and turns Jewish life into ruin. We are now drowning in a flood of blood...Through the *Kohanim* and *Levi'im*, help will come to all Israel”, G. Greenberg, “Kristallnacht: The American Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Theology of Response”, in Maria Mazzenga ed., *American Religious Responses to Kristallnacht*, Palgrave MacMillan:2009, p.166.

the Temple in Jerusalem rely on the present-day existence of Cohen and Levi name-bearers as they dream about re-enacting Israel's ancient sacrificial system.

In this manner, Jewish congregations have been witnessing the coexistence of two very different types of spiritual leadership for slightly less than two thousand years. On the one hand, there are rabbis, endowed with actual juridical and magisterial powers, but associated with the sadness of exile. On the other hand, there are *Kohanim/Leviim*, perceived as living reminders of the joy of Temple worship, but nowadays almost entirely devoid of actual religious significance. A similar state of affairs would be unthinkable not only in the Protestant world, but in any Christian denomination. Reflecting on MJ, one should therefore ask whether this dual dimension of the Jewish religious leadership is of any relevance for a movement that would like to see itself as part of the Jewish nation rather than as a Protestant denomination among many others. To formulate the issue in more fundamental terms, to what extent and in what mode should Jewish Messianic faith in Yeshua affect the way spiritual leadership is currently viewed and exerted in non-Messianic Jewish congregations? Should the former strengthen the latter, transform it or simply abolish it?

It is interesting to note that the two aspects of the Jewish spiritual leadership were somehow present in Yeshua, although in a mode that stood in sharp contrast to those who were supposed to incarnate them at the time. Yeshua was a rabbi, an expert in the interpretation of the Law, a teacher of wisdom and a preacher<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, he was a rabbi unlike all the others whom he readily criticized<sup>10</sup>. True, Yeshua was not a priest in the traditional sense of the term; he did not partake of the Levitical lot as to his lineage. This, notwithstanding, only renders his priest-like features all the more striking. The "holy one of God" (ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ, Mark 1.24) manifests himself as having the power to purify, heal and forgive sins. Among the four gospels, the priestly dimension of Yeshua is nowhere more emphasized than in that of John. The one whom the Father has sanctified (ἡγίασεν) and sent into the world (10:36) sanctifies himself (ἐγὼ ἀγιάζω ἑμαυτόν, 17:19) at the hour of his sacrifice on the Cross, so that his disciples might be equally sanctified (αὐτοὶ ὧσιν ἡγιασμένοι

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mat.26: 25; Mar.9:5; 11:21; Joh.1:38, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Mat.23: 27-28. The Gospels probably make little difference between the rabbis and the "doctors of the Law".

ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, *ibid.*). An identical terminology is applied to the consecration of priests in the Old Testament:

<sup>NJB</sup> **Exodus 28:41** You will dress your brother Aaron and his sons in these; you will then anoint them, invest them and consecrate them to serve me in the priesthood.

<sup>BGT</sup> και ἐνδύσεις αὐτὰ Ααρων τὸν ἀδελφόν σου και τοὺς υἱοὺς αὐτοῦ μετ' αὐτοῦ και χρίσεις αὐτούς και ἐμπλήσεις αὐτῶν τὰς χεῖρας και ἁγιάσεις αὐτούς ἵνα ἱερατεύωσιν μοι

וְהִלְבַּשְׁתָּ אֹתָם אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו אֵת־בְּגָדֵי אֶת־וִמְשָׁמְוֹ וְאֵת־אֲבֵנֵי הַחֹשֶׁן וְאֵת־אֲבֵנֵי הַתְּהֵמָנִים וְקִדְשְׁתָּ אֹתָם וְחִרַּשְׁתָּ אֹתָם וְעָבְדוּ לִּי

There are a number of parallel passages (Ex.28:41, 29:1, 30:30, 40:13, Lev.8:12). Priests are consecrated in order to consecrate Israel, which they do by offering sacrifices (Ex.29:27, 29:37, Num.5:9, 1 Ch.23: 13, 2Ch, 30:17, Ez.46:20, 2Ma, 1:26, etc.). This is also the way the author of the epistle to the Hebrews describes the action of priests in the Temple:

<sup>NJB</sup> **Hebrews 9:13** The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkled on those who have incurred defilement, may restore their bodily purity (ἁγιάζει πρὸς τὴν τῆς σαρκὸς καθαρότητα).

However, all these considerations say little about a form of priesthood that would be attuned to the will of Yeshua. They say even less about the form of priesthood in Yeshua that would harmonize with the Jewish nation. From this point of view, the most explicit text of the New Testament is undeniably the epistle to the Hebrews. As its title reads, it is precisely in this letter that the Jewish disciples of Yeshua should be able to find the teaching on priesthood that they are looking for.

Reading the epistle with such ideas in mind, one can hardly avoid being disappointed by its content, though. Certainly, the letter expands upon the role of Jesus as high priest as well as on the status of Levitical priesthood in the phase of history inaugurated by Yeshua. The problem is that the author, as is well-known, emphasizes the rupture that needs to take place, in the name of Yeshua, with the traditionally Jewish concept of priesthood. He repeatedly contrasts the Levitical order with an order which is both newer and more ancient; that is, the



order according to Melchizedek the high priest<sup>11</sup>. Accordingly, rather than giving clues as to fleshing out an authentically Jewish-Messianic (“Yeshuist”) idea of priesthood, the epistle seems to establish an impervious separation between the notion of priesthood in Yeshua and the traditional Jewish idea of priesthood. At least, this is the way the epistle has been understood by Christians in the course of centuries: Melchizedek is definitely not a Jew; *ergo* priesthood in Yeshua is now free from all reference to Jewishness.

It is this traditional exegesis that I would like to challenge at this point. I will contend that the sacramental dimension of priesthood, as distinguished from the rabbinic concept of spiritual leadership, does not lose its value when referred to the Messianic revelation of Yeshua. I am convinced that this dimension, seen from a Jewish-Messianic point of view, is definitively not a lesser reality than the nostalgic memory of it, as preserved by the Jewish-non-Messianic tradition. It is indeed, in my eyes, much more than a nostalgic memory.

## **2. Revisiting the epistle to the Hebrews: the *Aufhebung* of Aaronic priesthood and Israel’s messianic *teshuva***

Abram the Aramaic became the first Hebrew, the first Jew on earth when his name was changed to Abraham, as an effect of G’d’s unconditional grace. Consequently, the mysterious king-priest of Salem who gives his blessing to Abraham (Gen 14.19), as tithes are presented and received, can hardly be a Jew<sup>12</sup>. Is the fact of not being a Jew sufficient, though, to ensure that one is a Gentile?

At first sight, the logic seems difficult to thwart. Glossing over the fact that the epistle to the Hebrews saw in the tithes of Abraham the symbol of the priesthood that would adorn his descendants, a long tradition of Christian exegesis has applied this logic to the fall of the Jewish priesthood and the corresponding rise of a Gentile one<sup>13</sup>. The Melchizedek episode in

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<sup>11</sup> See the whole chapter 7 of the epistle.

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Genesis 14:20 וּבְרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר־מִגֵּן צָרִידָה בְיַדָּהּ וַיִּתֵּן־לָהּ מֵעֶשֶׂר מְבֹל

In the Massoretic tradition as well as in the LXX and in the Vulgate, who is being given tithes by whom is notoriously unclear. For the author of the epistle, it is clear, though, that Abraham is the one to present tithes to Melchizedek (Heb. 7:6).

<sup>13</sup> “Now think how great this man must have been, if the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the finest plunder. We know that any of the descendants of Levi who are admitted to the priesthood are obliged by the Law

Gen 14 was said to prophetically foreshadow the withdrawal of priesthood from Jews and its transmission to Gentiles after Christ's death and resurrection<sup>14</sup>. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr writes that Melchizedek

"(...) was a priest of those who were in uncircumcision and blessed the circumcised Abraham who brought him tithes, so God has shown that His everlasting Priest, called also by the Holy Spirit Lord, would be Priest of those in uncircumcision"<sup>15</sup>.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, thinking that the prophetic meaning of the episode referred to the deposition of Jewish priesthood and more generally, to the banning of Jews from God's election in favor of Gentiles, had become so commonplace among Christian writers that it deserved not more than a short, albeit explicit, notice in Augustine's *Exposition on the Psalms*:

"Because there was there a sacrifice after the order of Aaron, and afterwards He of His own Body and Blood appointed a sacrifice after the order of Melchizedek; [God] changed then His Countenance in the Priesthood, and sent away the kingdom of the Jews, and came to the Gentiles"<sup>16</sup>.

The fact that, prior to Augustine, John Chrysostom had shown himself, unsurprisingly, more than forthcoming on the topic in his homilies on the epistle to the Hebrews. Endorsing the general opinion that St. Paul was the author of the text, he praises the apostle for having gone beyond the equality between Jews and Gentiles so repeatedly emphasized in his epistle to the Romans:

"For there indeed he declares Abraham to be the forefather both of our polity and also of the Jewish. But here he is exceeding bold against him, and shows that the uncircumcised person is far superior. (...) For the one paid the tithe, which indicates the priest: the other gave the blessing, which indicates the superior. This superiority passes on also to the descendants.

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to take tithes from the people, that is, from their own brothers although they too are descended from Abraham. But this man, who was not of the same descent, took his tithe from Abraham, and he gave his blessing to the holder of the promises", Heb 7:4-6. Tithes were indeed the prerogative of the Levitical order (cf. Nu 18:21-32, Dt 12:7,12,18).

<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, the Talmud, drawing on the mention of Melchizedek in Psalm 110, underlines that the Aaronic order will subsist forever, due to the blessing that follows the offering of the tithes: "[the priesthood] was given to Abraham, as it is written, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool; which is followed by, The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek," meaning, 'because of the words of Melchizedek.', Nedarim 32b. דְּבָרָה [2007] (Hebrew) (p. 184). The Talmud plays on the morphological contiguity between דְּבָרָה, "cause, reason, manner" (מְלִפְצֵיק עֲבוּתֵי) after the order, or manner, of Melchizedek, where the yud' witnesses the poetical use of an ancient genitive ending) and דְּבָרָה, word, applied to the blessing pronounced by Melchizedek.

<sup>15</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch.33, , *Ante-Nicene Fathers* v. 1, "Ages MCL" ed.

<sup>16</sup> On Psalm 34, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, v.8, *ibid*.

In a marvelous and triumphant way he cast out the Jewish [system] (Θαυμαστῶς καὶ περιγεγονότως ἔρριψεν ἔξω τὰ Ἰουδαϊκά). On this account he said, 'Ye are become dull,' (c. 5:12), because he wished to lay these foundations, that they might not start away"<sup>17</sup>.

It is interesting to observe how an episode which, according to its most literal meaning, tells about the blessing of Abraham at the hands of a priest-king, in exchange for the enigmatic acknowledgment of his spiritual pre-eminence, becomes, in the most common understanding of the Fathers, a symbol for the divine disgrace that will fall on the Jewish nation in the days of its visitation by the Son of God. Moreover, what comes out of Chrysostom's commentary in a particularly striking way is some fundamental lack of coherence in this line of interpretation. Just before claiming that the passage tells about the future replacement of Jewish priesthood by the Gentile one (on verse 4), Chrysostom comments in the following manner (v.3):

"(...) he said not 'of men (simply) He taketh hold,' but wishing to exalt them [the Hebrews] and to show that their race is great and honorable, he says, "but of the seed of Abraham He taketh hold." Since they wished for something great, and to have an advantage over the [converts] from the Gentiles, he shows that they have an advantage in this while he did not hurt those from the Gentiles at all. In what respect now is this? Because of them is the salvation, because He took hold of them first, because from that race He assumed flesh. 'For,' he says, "He taketh not hold of angels, but of the seed of Abraham He taketh hold.' Hereby he both gives honor to the Patriarch, and shows also what 'the seed of Abraham' is. He reminds them of the promise made to him, saying, 'To thee and to thy seed will I give this land' (Genesis 13:15); showing by the very least thing, the nearness [of the relationship] in that they were 'all of one'."<sup>18</sup>.

Melchizedek being the *typos* of Christ according to the author of the epistle, why does he need to lay such an emphasis on the Jewish descent of Jesus, provided this identification serves the purpose of releasing priesthood in Christ from its Jewish gangue, as a number of Fathers claim?<sup>19</sup> If Melchizedek "is" somehow Jesus and Jesus is a Jew, how come these Fathers present Melchizedek as the very *typos* of Gentile Christians exclusively?

I would suggest that one here touches a blind spot which not only pertains to this line of interpretation, but to the theology of all historical Christian confessions indiscriminately. On

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<sup>17</sup> Hom.12, on verse 5, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, v.4, *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> For a more exhaustive inquiry regarding this line of interpretation, see G. Bardy, "Melchisédek dans la tradition patristique", *Revue Biblique*, 35, 1926 and M. Simon, "Melchisédek dans la polémique entre juifs et chrétiens et dans la légende", *Revue d'Histoire et de de Philosophie Religieuses*, 17, 1937.

the one hand, Jesus is a Jew; on the other, his advent marks the divine election of Gentiles, chronologically succeeding to that of Israel. Now, why did Jesus need to be born a Jew if the purpose of God's providence was to replace the election of Israel by that of the Gentiles? Can the ultimate word of God's providence on mankind – a word that, in hindsight, gives its meaning to the whole history of Israel - be really *that* accidental and scantily coherent? In actual fact, Chrysostom does not explain why this is the case; he is satisfied with stating that this was indeed the case and moves on in his commentary:

“But that nearness [between God and Jews] was not great: [so Paul] comes back to this, and thenceforward dwells upon the dispensation which was after the flesh (...)”<sup>20</sup>.

Again: why did salvation need to come from the Jews, from the time of Abraham, if it required the exclusion of Jews to become true? Of course, because the line of interpretation just mentioned fails to give entire theological satisfaction does not imply that a better one is at hand. The essential difficulty remains; namely: if the identification between Jesus and Melchizedek does not imply a rejection of the validity of the first covenant, why does the author of the epistle chooses a non-Jew to incarnate the priesthood which is according to Christ?

Too little attention has been paid, in my estimation, to the rabbinic interpretation of the Melchizedek episode in Gen.14. Identifying Melchizedek with Sem, the son of Noah, is not only about bringing forward a distant kinship between the two characters<sup>21</sup>. This would have been insufficient to counter the received Christian interpretation since, from the rabbinic perspective, a Semite remains a Gentile provided he or she is not a Jew. The point of the rabbinic idea is that, being ethnically related to Abraham, Melchizedek/Sem is a living witness of the time that precedes the distinction between Jews and Gentiles. In the episode, he acts as the biological intermediary – the ancestor of the people of Israel, although not a Jew himself -

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> "Melchizedek was Shem the son of Noah, a priest most high.", Pirke De Rabbi Eliezar 9A.i, see equally Rashi, Commentaries, Genesis 14:18, Talmud, Tr. Nedarim 32, Midrash Rabbah, Vol.2, Soncino Press translation, 1983, p. 796; Jerusalem Targum on Genesis 14:18, Midrash 126b, Talmud, Tr. Nedarim 32b. Thomas Aquinas knows this tradition of interpretation and does not appear to question it: “Et secundum Glossam, Hebraei dicunt ipsum fuisse Sem primogenitum Noe, et tunc quando Abraham habuit victoriam, erat annorum 390, alias 309”, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, c.7, l.1.

between the great figures that embody two distinct divine covenants. Melchizedek is chosen to transmit to Abraham, the one with whom God establishes his covenant with the Jewish nation, the blessing of the ancient covenant settled with all mankind in Noah. In this manner, it is not because Melchizedek is a non-Jew that he is a Gentile. He represents a still undivided mankind in need of a chosen nation, a people that will take up the fight against the inner disease from which mankind had suffered since the time of its first parents. Actually, Christian theology has much to take from such an interpretation. What if Melchizedek/Sem foreshadowed a Savior who, though born a Jew, would not be satisfied with redeeming Israel, but would *also* come for the sake of Gentiles, thus carrying somehow the whole mankind in his own person? This makes sense, to say the least. Jesus/Melchizedek blesses Abraham and, together with him, the priesthood that would come out of his bosom, in order that, through Israel's holy history, this blessing might someday reach all the nations of the earth.

However, the rabbinic interpretation of the episode in Gen.14 is not the only one to enable a reading of the quasi identification of Jesus and Melchizedek in Hebrews from some other perspective than replacement theology. Second Temple Jewish literature, especially a number of Qumran written traditions, provides a third line of interpretation. Although very different from the rabbinic one, this third line can be seen as granting a pivotal complement to the second. In actual fact, though against all expectations, the figure of Melchizedek appears to have played a central role in the Messianic eschatology of religious groups professing an ardent, at times almost fanatic, concern about Torah purity at the cusp of the first millennium. The question naturally arises why Melchizedek the non-Jew came to symbolize religious aspirations that were most inherently Jewish.

To find the answer, it is sufficient to read through what is undoubtedly the major document in that regard; namely 11QMelchizedek, a manuscript fragment discovered at Qumran in 1956. The whole text is an eschatological Midrash derived from the considerations on the Day of Atonement and the Jubilee Year in Levitical ch.25:

“4.[...Its interpretation, פֶּשֶׁר] for the final days concerns the captives, who [ ] and whose 5. teachers have been hidden and kept secret, and from the inheritance of Melchizedek (צִדְקָה וּמִגְחָלֶת מַלְכֵי), fo[r ] and they are the inheritan[ce of Melchize]dek who 6. will make them return. And liberty shall be proclaimed to them, to free them from [the debt of] all their iniquities. And this [will] [happen] 7. in the first week of the jubilee (that occurs) after [the] ni[ne]

jubilees. And the Day of Atonement is the end of the tenth jubilee, 8. in which atonement shall be made (לכפר) for all the sons of [light and for] the men [of] the lot of Melchizedek [ ] over [them] [ ] according to all their [doings], for 9. it is the time for the year of grace of Melchizedek and of [his] arm[ies, the nation] [of] the holy ones of God, of the administration of justice, as is written 10. about him in the songs of David, who said: 'Elohim shall [stand] in the assembly of God; in the midst of the gods he shall judge'<sup>22</sup>.

The one who is designated as Melchizedek is explicitly presented as the Messiah of Israel:

"15. This [ ] is the day of the [peace about] which he said [ through Isaiah the prophet who said: ['How] beautiful 16. upon (the) mountains are the feet [of] the messenger who announces peace, the messenger of good who announces salvation, [saying] to Zion: your **God** [is king'] (מלך אלוהים)]. 17. Its interpretation: the mountains [are] the prophet[s]; they [ ] every [ ] 18. And the messenger is the anointed of the spirit [ ] (משיח והר-ה), as Daniel said [about him: 'Until an anointed, a prince (משיח נגיד) it is seven weeks'. And the messenger of] 19. good who announces salvation] is the one about whom it is written [20. 'To comfort] the [afflicted', its interpretation:] to [in]struct them in all the ages of the world".

For one thing, Melchizedek is the human king of justice who "will carry out the vengeance of God's judgements ([נקום משפטי אלה])" against Belial and "the spirits of his lot" (13). This brings to mind the anonymous figure of the high priest in Qumran War Scroll (1QM, 4Q491-496). Under the command of this high priest and the guidance of "his" Levites, Israel is depicted waging a victorious war, at the end of time, against Belial and his servants – Gentiles and unfaithful Jews alike<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, there is no denying that the central figure of 11QMelchizedek presents features that are evocative of a non-human, divine-like being<sup>24</sup>. As quoted above, it is "written **about him** in the songs of David, who said: '**Elohim** shall [stand] in the assembly of God" (v.10). In the document, the one called Melchizedek judges human beings and holds spiritual entities under his sway. Is he a hypostasis of God (J.Milik), Michael

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<sup>22</sup> The passage is quoted in E.F. Mason, *Second Temple Jewish Messianism and the Priestly Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, "Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah" 74, Brill, 2008. I have extensively relied on the conclusions of this study as regards the Qumran sources.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. equally Qumran's *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* where the name of Melchizedek (conjectured) appears in the context of an "eschatological war in Heaven" (J. Davila quoted by Mason, p.165) and the *Visions of Amram* where Melchizedek ("my king is justice"), said to be one of the three names of God, together with the angel Mikael and the Prince of light, is opposed to Melchizedek ("my king is wicked"), see Mason p.167-168.

<sup>24</sup> In Philo of Alexandria's *Embassy to Gaius*, 3.79-82, Melchizedek is interpreted as a symbolic figure for God's Logos, cf. Mason, p.161-163.

the archangel (D.F. Watson, J. Davila, P.J. Kobelski) or God himself (F. Manzi, G.L. Cockerill)? One thing is certain: the Melchizedek of the fragment cannot be an ordinary human being<sup>25</sup>. But this is all we need to know: whether God or the greatest of his angels, Qumran's Melchizedek is, at least in this fragment, conceived as quintessentially evading the distinction between Jews and Gentiles that characterizes human kind since the time of Abraham. In the text, the human and Messianic figure who will defeat Belial at the end of history is God or one of his supreme angels having taken into his hands the role of Israel's high priest and commander of the faithful ones' armies.

Accordingly, it was perfectly natural for the defenders of Torah's purity to choose the Melchizedek of Gen 14 as a champion for their cause. In their eyes, the fact that he could not be a Jew did not entail that he was a Gentile, but that he had been, at the very beginning of Israel's history, the manifestation of the divine Presence on earth, blessing Abraham and his priestly posterity. In sum, whether seen as a purely human being, a vessel of that part of mankind that G'd will save (rabbinic tradition) or as a celestial being coming to Israel's rescue at the end of times (Qumran), the Melchizedek of the epistle to the Hebrews transcends the dilemma between Jews and Gentiles that warrants the supersessionist interpretation found in the writings of the Fathers<sup>26</sup>. Thus, it is not because the author of the epistle dwells on the identity/similarity between Jesus and Melchizedek that he necessarily intends to suggest the rejection of Israel and its replacement by that of Gentiles. Taken literally, what the text of the epistle tells about is another kind of rejection – not that of Israel, but that of Levitical

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Mason's criticism of P. Rainbow's suggestions, p.186-187. Mason concludes a thorough terminological analysis of the document in this way: "Though one certainly must argue with caution when studying reconstructed texts, it seems clear that again the author of 11QMelchizedek is identifying Melchizedek with {ψηωλ}", *ibid.*, p. 182

<sup>26</sup> Seen from a Christian perspective, the "or" naturally becomes an "and": the one whom Israel was waiting for was simultaneously a human and a divine Messiah. The idea that the author of Hebrews alludes to the double nature of Christ, totally man and totally God, when writing about Melchizedek is key to Thomas Aquinas' reading of the epistle. For instance, Aquinas comments on the mention that Melchizedek is "without father and mother" (7:3) in the following manner: "Illud autem, quod est proprium Dei, non debet attribui creaturae. Solius vero Dei patris est esse patrem Christi. Ergo in nativitate illius, qui ipsum praefigurabat, non debuit fieri mentio de patre carnali. Item quantum ad generationem aeternam dicit sine matre. Et hoc ne intelligas istam generationem esse materialem, sicut mater dat materiam genito, sed est spiritualis; sicut splendor a sole. Supra I, 3: qui cum sit splendor", c.7, l.1.

priesthood. Therefore, what we need to investigate at this point is the meaning that such a rejection could have in the light of Israel's everlasting election.

### **3. The Melchisedekian subsumption of Aaronic priesthood and its implications for MJ**

As is well-known, the Qumran community's speculations about the coming of a high priest and the rise of a holy priesthood stemmed from a growing discontent with what Temple priesthood and the whole Levitical order had become at the dawn of the first millennium. To a large extent, the birth and expansion of the Pharisaic movement, the ancestor of rabbinic Judaism, happened to be just another kind of reaction to the crisis of the Levitical system<sup>27</sup>. In other words, aspiration to a renewed form of priesthood was not the result of foreign influences; it came from the inside of the Jewish nation. On their part, the disciples of Christ could have claimed that their Master had definitively done away with the very idea of priesthood, especially after the destruction of the second Temple at the hands of the Romans. What emerges from the writings contained in the New Testament is the embryo of a new order – apostles, “elders”/*presbuteroi*, “supervisors”/*episkopoi*, “servants of the table”/*diakonoi* teachers, prophets, etc.- which originates in the person and precepts of Yeshua, thus having no connection whatsoever with the ancient Levitical system<sup>28</sup>. The event taking place at the very center of the first congregations of disciples; namely, the breaking of the bread which is the body of Christ and the drinking of the wine which is his blood (1 Cor 10:15-17 and 11:27-29), bears no obvious reference to the sacrificial duties of Jewish priesthood. However, by interpreting Christ's death on the Cross as the perfect sacrifice in a Levitical sense, the definitive realization of what Temple worship was aiming at, is not the author of the epistle to the Hebrews suggesting that, beyond the objective rupture with the ancient system of priesthood, the new order established in Christ captures and therefore preserves the very essence of the old one? Is he not implying that this new order is precisely what will provide the renewal of priesthood that the Jewish world of the second Temple

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<sup>27</sup> See for instance J. Neusner's *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees Before 70: The masters*, Brill, Leiden, 1971, p.64, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism*, vol.1, Brill, Leiden, 1973, p.68-70.

<sup>28</sup> “Any change in the priesthood must mean a change in the Law as well. So our Lord, of whom these things were said, belonged to a different tribe, the members of which have never done service at the altar; everyone knows he came from Judah, a tribe which Moses did not mention at all when dealing with priests”, Heb 7:12-14 NJB.



period was yearning for? Of course, there occurs a “change”, literally a “transfer” (μετάθεσις) as to the Law (Heb 7:12), but the reference to Melchizedek is here to show that what seems to be an innovation without foundations in the Law is, in fact, the accomplishment of a design that preceded the Law and gave existence to it, as witnessed in the Torah itself:

“This becomes even more clearly evident if another priest, of the type of Melchizedek, arises who is a priest not in virtue of a law of physical descent, but in virtue of the power of an indestructible life. For he is attested by the prophecy: You are a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek”.<sup>29</sup>

The fact is that the founding act of Christ’s priesthood is not something essentially different from the system of Temple-worship; the former relates to the latter as the truth in heaven relates to its prefiguration on earth:

“But now Christ has come, as the high priest of all the blessings which were to come. He has passed through the greater, the more perfect tent, not made by human hands, that is, not of this created order; and he has entered the sanctuary once and for all, taking with him not the blood of goats and bull calves, but his own blood, having won an eternal redemption..”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, if the founding principle of Temple-worship was the sanctification that proceeds from offering to G’ d the appointed sacrifice, not only does the unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross follow the same pattern, but it raises the ancient sacrificial system to a level of unsurpassable perfection due to the excellence of the victim offered to G’ d:

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkled on those who have incurred defilement, may restore their bodily purity. How much more will the blood of Christ, who offered himself, blameless as he was, to God through the eternal Spirit, purify our conscience from dead actions so that we can worship the living God”<sup>31</sup>.

In this manner, the only text of the NT where one finds lengthy considerations on the priesthood which is according to Christ or, to follow the epistle, “according to the Order of

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<sup>29</sup> Heb 7:15-17.

<sup>30</sup> Heb 9:11-12 NJB

<sup>31</sup> The author of the epistle emphasizes the coherence of his vision by going back to the origin and foundation of the old and the new regimes of salvation. Just as Levitical sacrifices derive from the first covenant with G’ d sealed by Moses with the blood of an animal, the sacramental or “mysterical” dimension experienced when the disciples assemble derives from the new covenant sealed with the blood of Christ on the Cross. Expanding upon the scriptural and theological implications of this parallel would take us too far, unfortunately.

Melchizedek”, rests on the idea of a unique sacrifice which has become an ever-flowing source of sanctification for the faithful<sup>32</sup>.

Accordingly, reflecting on priesthood as a constitutive element of the Body of Christ leads back to a sacramental dimension which is much closer to the Levitical concept of priesthood than to the rabbinic understanding of spiritual leadership. It is too little to say that, following the epistle to the Hebrews, the analogy with Levitical priesthood leads to an understanding of the priesthood which is according to Christ. In actual fact, that which the epistle describes as priesthood in Christ, by perfecting the Aaronic priesthood, takes in the whole memory and genealogy of Temple worship. I would argue that the essential message of the epistle to the Hebrews – whence it deserves its name, despite the impression produced by a first and cursory reading – is that the rupture with the Levitical system willed by Christ, embodied in his own non-Aaronic descent, established by his death and carried out by the first generations of his disciples, is in *no way* a rejection of Israel. It is an institution throughout shaped and pervaded by the living memory of Israel’s priesthood<sup>33</sup>. Ultimately, it is Israel’s

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<sup>32</sup> In spite of the fact that no direct and obvious reference to the Eucharist is to be found in the epistle, exegetes such as A. Vanhoye (Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Roma: Pontificie Institute Biblico, 1989), J. Swetnam ("Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Biblica*, 70, 1989), A. A. Just ("Entering holiness: Christology and Eucharist in Hebrews", *Concordia*, 69: 1, 2005) have promoted a convincing reading of the text from the perspective of the liturgical setting of the Lord’s supper. If it is the case, as an analysis of the logic and the style of the epistle would tend to confirm, then the striking feature of Hebrews’ liturgical understanding of the Lord’s supper is its focus on the notion of sacrifice derived from Temple-worship. Besides, it is most intriguing that, in an epistle which elaborates upon every single detail of the episode in Gen.14, the fact that Melchizedek brings bread and wine as he goes out to meet Abraham comes under no mention. Indeed, *what else besides this element*, probably most well-known of all the addressees of the epistle, *could ultimately legitimate the parallel drawn between the offering of Melchizedek and the sacrifice of Christ on the cross?*

<sup>33</sup> To illustrate this point, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides extensive quotations from the rituals of the different types of ordinations: “1541. The liturgy of the Church, however, sees in the priesthood of Aaron and the service of the Levites, as in the institution of the seventy elders, a prefiguring of the ordained ministry of the New Covenant. Thus in the Latin Rite the Church prays in the consecratory preface of the ordination of bishops: “God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by your gracious word you have established the plan of your Church. From the beginning, you chose the descendants of Abraham to be your holy nation. You established rulers and priests and did not leave your sanctuary without ministers to serve you.... 1542. At the ordination of priests, the Church prays: “Lord, holy Father, . . . when you had appointed high priests to rule your people,

priesthood carried to its perfection, so that it might spread to all the people of the earth and be perpetuated by them.

To what extent do the above considerations help us to reflect on what the idea of priesthood in the Messianic movement should be? If the MJ is about Israel's finally regaining the lot that was prepared for it in its Messiah from all eternity - a lot it was deprived of due to its own disobedience combined with the jealousy of the Nations - then sacramental priesthood is a central element of this lot, since it encapsulates the Aaronic heritage of Israel in a superior mode. In other words, the truth of Messianic spiritual leadership lies beyond its rabbinic concept, a concept which, from a functional point of view, more or less corresponds to the low-Church Protestant notion of pastoral leadership. A Messianic leader ought not to be *merely* a rabbi, preaching, teaching and judging. All these ministerial aspects should flow from a dimension which is sacramental according to its essence. I would contend that a Messianic leader should primarily be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, sanctifying the people by providing the blessings that convey the grace of Yeshua and offering sacrifices in the name of Yeshua – sacrifices and rituals that dispense to the nation the grace of justification and divinization flowing from the one and unique sacrifice of Yeshua on the Cross.

This is both an almost self-evident and an endlessly joyful truth. Elementary theological reasoning leads to the conclusion that, if Yeshua is really the Messiah that Israel has been expecting since the time of Abraham (Gen.22, 11-13), it is simply impossible that his realm would be inferior to the regime of Temple worship, itself remembered as a great blessing in

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you chose other men next to them in rank and dignity  
to be with them and to help them in their task....  
you extended the spirit of Moses to seventy wise men....  
You shared among the sons of Aaron  
the fullness of their father's power.”

1543. In the consecratory prayer for ordination of deacons, the Church confesses:

“Almighty God . . .

You make the Church, Christ's body,  
grow to its full stature as a new and greater temple.

You enrich it with every kind of grace  
and perfect it with a diversity of members  
to serve the whole body in a wonderful pattern of unity.

You established a threefold ministry of worship and service,  
for the glory of your name.

As ministers of your tabernacle you chose the sons of Levi  
and gave them your blessing as their everlasting inheritance.”, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/>.

the course of Israel's enduring *Galut*. The welcoming of the Messiah by Israel, even if it is by a tiny portion from the whole nation, *must* mean the end of the time of *Galut*, at least for this portion of the nation. Since the prevalence of the rabbinic type of leadership and the obsolescence of the priestly one is the most direct consequence of *Galut*, the end of *Galut* must imply the renewal in Christ of Israel's priesthood and, together with it, a thorough reconsideration of the mode of authority exerted by contemporary rabbis in mainstream Judaism. This should be, let me repeat, a motive for profound joy among Jewish believers. The quasi impossible dream of rebuilding the Temple and reviving its sacrificial rites in Jerusalem manifests the harrowing longing of contemporary Jews for a quintessentially different configuration of their tradition, a configuration that would show itself simultaneously as very ancient and completely new. Knowing that this reconfiguration is not only possible, but at hand through faith in Yeshua, should be received by our contemporary Jewish brothers and sisters as a wonderful and stupefying message.

At the same time, however, it is plain to see that the whole issue of a renewal of Jewish priesthood within MJ is a thoroughly delicate and sensitive one. It implies moving away from the Protestant concept of spiritual leadership that has hitherto shaped the Messianic movement. Indeed, this Protestant concept, as we pointed out in the beginning, derives from the more or less deliberate dismissal of the sacramental dimension that priesthood had assumed, and still assumes, in the Roman Catholic Church<sup>34</sup>. Even more dramatically from a mainstream Messianic point of view, it implies drawing closer to traditional Christian denominations such as the Catholic or the Orthodox Churches which have carefully preserved this sacramental dimension throughout the centuries. The fact is that these confessions have hitherto been commonly rejected by Messianic believers on the grounds of their past and/or present anti-Semitic aspects.

The point here is not simply about having to experience some unpleasant theological and ecclesiological proximity. Priesthood does not arise from the void. Aaronic priesthood and

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<sup>34</sup> The Catholic definition of a priest is no longer exclusively referred to celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice. The Eucharist is rather seen as a central element in a wider range of tasks related to sanctification: "These ministers in the society of the faithful are able by the sacred power of orders to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins, and they perform their priestly office publicly for men in the name of Christ". *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

Levitical service were based on ancestral family records and legitimate liturgical consecration. The simultaneously new and primeval order of priesthood described in the epistle to the Hebrews cannot but originate in the will of Yeshua and the design of the Father. The twelve are chosen or “made” apostles by Christ<sup>35</sup>. In turn, they appoint or ordain others for the sake of ministry by laying their hands on them, as when they appoint seven disciples for the service of the table or “diaconal” ministry<sup>36</sup>. Paul and Barnabas are set apart for ministry by the leaders of the Church in Antioch in the same way<sup>37</sup>. In turn, Paul and Barnabas established elders or *presbuteroi* by laying their hands on them<sup>38</sup>. Priesthood in Yeshua rests on the transmission of an office, namely the apostolic ministry in the broad sense of the word, that goes back to the Master, a transmission which is visibly manifested through the imposition of hands (*semikhah* in Hebrew, *cheirotomia* in Greek) by those who have previously received the same imposition from their own elders.

True, the *semikhah* ritual, as the typical feature of ordination, is not the property of historical Churches such as the Catholic and the Orthodox. Apart from rabbinic ordination, which obviously bears no reference to Yeshua, it is commonly found in almost all congregations born of the Reformation. At the same time, the outcome of the Reformation has been a dramatic weakening, if not a wholesale rejection, of the sacramental dimension of the *cheirotomia*. Accordingly, how could the Messianic ever have a chance to regain a sense of sacramental priesthood, so as to put the will of Yeshua over Israel into practice, as long as it clings to a Protestant understanding of the *semikhah*? How could this sacramental sense of ordination be revived wherever ordination has not been transmitted as a sacrament and is

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<sup>35</sup> «καὶ ἐποίησεν δώδεκα [οὓς καὶ ἀποστόλους ὠνόμασεν] ἵνα ᾧσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἵνα ἀποστέλλῃ αὐτοὺς κηρύσσειν», Mar 3:14/Nestle-Aland 27th Ed. Greek New Testament.

<sup>36</sup> “The whole assembly approved of this proposal and elected Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these to the apostles, and after prayer they laid their hands on them, καὶ προσευξάμενοι ἐπέθηκαν αὐτοῖς τὰς χεῖρας”. (Act 6:5-6 NJB)

<sup>37</sup> **Acts 13:3** So it was that after fasting and prayer they laid their hands on them, ἐπιθέντες τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῖς, and sent them off.

<sup>38</sup> <sup>JB</sup> **Acts 14:23** In each of these churches they appointed elders, χειροτονήσαντες δὲ αὐτοῖς κατ’ ἐκκλησίαν πρεσβυτέρους, and with prayer and fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

been disconnected from the very element that defines this sacramental dimension; namely, the task of sanctification that goes together with the celebration of sacrificial offerings?<sup>39</sup>

The conclusion seems to be that, in order to renew the sacramental line that would link it back through the chain of generations to the life-giving institution of Yeshua, the Messianic movement should secure a visible form of ecclesial unity with the Catholic or the Orthodox Church. The key to the development of a genuine form of Jewish priesthood in Yeshua would – literally speaking – lie in the hands of Churches which are commonly considered to be the repository of the *gentilitas* and the traditional vehicles of anti-Semitism. At first sight, the paradox is hardly bearable. In order to receive the most precious gift of Yeshua to his own people, the Messianic movement would have to request it from the very historical Christian confessions that it wishes to keep at a distance, due to their non-Jewish configuration and their complicity with anti-Semitism.

This goes much further, obviously, than theological promiscuity. What is at stake is ecclesiological unity in some form or another. But what form precisely? The answer to this question – this will be my last one – depends on the possibility of seriously taking in an almost unbearable paradox.

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<sup>39</sup> The Reformers' rejection of the priestly caste is tightly connected with that of Eucharist as a sacrifice. This is, according to Luther, "the most wicked captivity", *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther Werke, 35. Consequently, the material symbols that tend to express the sacred dimension of the event, such as "vestments, ornaments, prayers, candles, organ, and the whole pageantry of outward things" should be as much as possible put aside, *ibid*, 36. Calvin echoes the opinion of Luther in equally strong terms: "The more detestable is the fabrication of those who, not content with Christ's priesthood, have presumed to sacrifice him anew! The papists attempt this each day, considering the Mass as the sacrificing of Christ", *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 502. Describing the Eucharist as an effective representation of the unique sacrifice of Christ is a way of bringing the Protestant and the Catholic approaches a step closer to each other, cf. *BEM (Baptism-Eucharist-Ministry) document*, Faith and Order Commission, WCC, "Eucharist", 1, 8. Still, envisaging this re-presentation itself as a sacrificial offering continues to present considerable difficulty from a Protestant viewpoint, as the following statement of a recent ecumenical dialogue shows: "Catholics prefer to stress the latter point, namely that the Eucharist brings the sacrifice of Christ to the foreground without therefore repeating it. Lutherans prefer particularly to underline the former point, namely the unique nature of the sacrifice of Christ, even though that sacrifice is present in the Eucharist", *Justification in the Life of the Church, A report from the Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialogue group from Sweden and Finland*, Uppsala, 2010, §227, p.78.

#### **4. Ecclesiological conditions for a Messianic renewal of Jewish priesthood in the Body of Christ**

It is most unlikely that any Orthodox Church will ever consider the idea of taking on the promotion of a Jewish form of priesthood. The first reason is that, for lack of a *Nostra Aetate* type of magisterial declaration, Orthodox believers, clerics and laypeople alike, with a handful of exceptions, continue to view not only Judaism in its present form, but the very fact of clinging to Jewish identity as implying a more or less open rejection of the Church. The second has to do with the fact that Orthodoxy, as an ecclesial communion, refers to a series of autonomous Churches, based on a national principle, whose faith, tradition and inner structure originally derive from Byzantium as their “mother Church”. How could such an ecclesial entity make a tradition that has nothing in common with the Byzantine part of itself?

What the creation of a Jewish priesthood implies is some degree of recognition of a nation and a tradition which, historically, have evolved beyond the boundaries of the Church. The recognition of Israel, as a structural component of the Body of Christ, *ecclesia ex circumcisione*, is the ecclesiological horizon that would give substance and meaning to the creation of a Jewish priesthood in Yeshua. This gesture of recognition, which is akin to the reconciliation of Joseph with his brothers, can only come from a Church whose ultimate principle does not lie in a specific culture that others would need to share in order to become part of herself, but in a universality that transcends all specific cultures, either from the West or from the East. This is precisely the case of the Catholic Church, as her name indicates.

In actual fact, the idea is less extravagant than it might seem. The establishment of a community of Hebrew speaking Catholics in Jerusalem and in others parts of Israel can already be seen – and it has certainly been seen by many of its founding members – as a first step in that direction. The main issue with which this *kehila* has been struggling is that of communion. From its very nature, the Church that has her foundation in Yeshua is a communion between Jews and Gentiles, so that there should be no place whatsoever in her for discrimination between Jews and Gentiles, either at the level of the faithful or of the clergy. However, distinction is not discrimination; it is even a condition for ecclesial communion. What if a number of Jewish Messianic leaders were someday to receive ordination at the hands of Catholic bishops, with the purpose of ministering to the specific spiritual needs of Jews who

came to believe in Yeshua? After all, an *ecclesia particularis* such as the Maronite Church, with her own hierarchy and specific tradition, ministers to her faithful without, for all that, excluding Latin-rite Catholics or Catholics from other particular Churches from Eucharistic communion. This non-exclusion or non-discrimination is, precisely, the sign of her being in communion with the Catholic Church as a whole, and henceforth part of her. In this manner, each particular Church, on the basis of her legitimate tradition and original discipline, enjoys a level of administrative independence from the Holy See as well as a degree of representation within the governing organs of the universal Church. Analogy-wise, each of these different aspects (legitimate tradition, specific discipline, degree of administrative independence and type of wider ecclesial representation) should be discussed when it comes to defining the type of community to which a Jewish priesthood would minister.

In this matter, I regard as key the ability of Catholic theology to reflect on the very foundations of its ecclesiology in a new light. The universality of the Church, which is the object of Yeshua's explicit will (John 17:21), does not merely lie in extending to all the nations of the earth without, for all that, reducing legitimate cultural diversity to some sort of colorless uniformity. At the very basis of this universality, of this capacity of reaching out to all the *Goyim* of the earth, lies the destruction of the wall of hatred that used to separate Jews and Gentiles and the establishment of their communion in Christ (Eph.2:14, see also St Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 48). The final unfolding of this principle of universality which is consubstantial to the Church of Christ requires from Catholic theology an effort, considerable and sincere, to distinguish between those ecclesial features that are *truly* universal and those which reflect the non-Jewish *forma mentis* that has prevailed since the extinction, at an early stage of her history, of the Jewish component of the Church. How many Gentile Christians, let alone Catholics, would understand nowadays that a Jewish believer cannot confess that he or she has been *incorporated* into the people of G'd through the reception of the Gospel of Jesus-Christ? The integration of the Jewish component of the Messianic movement into the Catholic Church will be impossible as long as it is threatened with the imposition of a discipline, a culture and a way-of-life that are perceived as foreign to a genuinely *Jewish* reception of the Gospel. Just as Jewish believers should come to the Catholic



Church with an attitude of respect towards the undeniable fruit that the development of a non-Jewish type of Christian civilization has borne throughout the centuries, the non-Jewish faithful should welcome the fruit that the Jewish religious tradition has produced during the same interval of centuries with respect and gratitude.

On the side of MJ, not less crucial and difficult would be its decision to insert itself into a wider hierarchic structure of which the keystone are bishops, bequeathed, through a legitimate and uninterrupted succession, with the ministry entrusted by Yeshua to his disciples. One cannot be ordained at the hands of a bishop without acknowledging his authority. This acknowledgement, in turn, implies that of the ordaining bishop's bonds of communion with the rest of the episcopacy, bonds on which rests the effective and visible communion of the whole Body of Christ<sup>40</sup>. True, in a significant number of its constitutive parts, the Protestant world has retained an episcopal structure, although it tends there to be reduced to a merely administrative role. The Catholic view on episcopacy, once again, is more sacramental and establishes a link with the "great priests" in the days of the Temple<sup>41</sup>.

Beyond the absence of such structure in most denominational components of the Evangelical movement and -here again- the coincidental absence of an equivalent one in rabbinic Judaism, the primary reason for the neglect of this institution by the MJ lies, in my opinion, in the striving to create an autonomous Jewish movement and the corresponding

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, §877, 879.

<sup>41</sup> "Episcopus ut sacerdos magnus sui gregis habendus est, a quo vita suorum fidelium in Christo quodammodo derivatur et pendet", *Constitutio de Sacra Liturgia, Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2d Vatican Council, §41. The ritual of ordination of a bishop (1968, revised in 1990) includes the following prayer, said by the main consecrating bishop alone: "Father, Knower of hearts, grant to this Your servant, whom You have chosen for the Episcopate, that he might shepherd Your holy flock, and that he might exhibit the high priesthood to You without ceasing (*summum sacerdotium tibi exhibeat sine reprehensione*), serving You night and day, so that he should constantly reflect Your merciful countenance and offer the gifts of Your Holy Church. By virtue of the Holy Spirit, grant that he may hold the power of the high priesthood -- that of forgiving sins -- according to Your mandate (*da ut virtute Spiritus summi sacerdotii habeat potestatem dimittendi peccata secundum mandatum suum*); that he might distribute gifts according to Your rule; and that he might loose every bond according to the power which You gave to the Apostles. May he please You in gentleness and with a pure heart, offering You a fragrance of sweetness through Your Son Jesus Christ, through whom glory, might and honor are Yours, with the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church, both now and forever", transl. J. Oliveri, <http://www.rore-sanctifica.org>. By way of synecdoche, the title applies most excellently to the bishop of Rome, whose special duty is to maintain the communion of the whole Body: "Age, indagemus adhuc diligentius qui [al. quis] sis, quam geras videlicet pro tempore personam in Ecclesia Dei. Quis es? Sacerdos magnus, summus Pontifex. Tu princeps episcoporum, tu haeres Apostolorum, tu primatu Abel, gubernatu Noe, patriarchatu Abraham, ordine Melchisedech, dignitate Aaron, auctoritate Moyses, iudicatu Samuel, potestate Petrus, unctioe Christus", St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Consideratione*, l.2, c.8.

conviction that hierarchic ties with Gentile Christianity might be of hindrance to the project. On the other hand, MJ, by its very essence, cannot consider that its boundaries coincide with that of the Body of Christ. This would be tantamount to excluding all Gentiles from it, which stands in explicit opposition to the teaching of Yeshua. Yet if this is so, how could MJ evade the duty, the *mitsva*, of forging visible bonds of communion with the rest of the Body of Christ? And how could it conform to the *mitsva* of Yeshua regarding the unity of the Body without an episcopal structure? If, as we said before, what we are looking for is a type of ecclesial articulation that would respect the autonomy and originality of a Jewish community of believers in Yeshua while integrating it into the wider community of the Body of Christ, then the episcopal structure, as it is extant in the CC, must play a key role in this articulation.

In this manner, what ultimately comes out of a reflection on Jewish priesthood is the mysterious manner in which the fate of the MJ and that of CC appear to be intertwined or providentially tied together. In order to become really Jewish, or to receive all the spiritual gifts that Yeshua has come to provide his own people, MJ needs the sacramental dimension that has been preserved and transmitted in the CC. Conversely, in order to become really Catholic; that is, universal in the proper sense of the term, the CC needs to receive back the Jewish dimension of Christianity that MJ has come, in recent years, to discover and uncover.

I do not underestimate the massive and multifarious practical obstacles that, on each side, stand in the way towards the realization of their reconciliation. I have simply avoided discussing them. Indeed, there is no point delving into issues *de facto* as long as issues *de jure* remain pending. Nor do I claim to have solved the latter. I will be happy if the present paper prompts substantial criticism, this being an indication that it did not totally miss the heart of the problem.

Fr. Antoine Lévy, OP  
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