

# Priesthood in the Book of Revelation

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A careful reader of Revelation will see some connections between temple and priesthood. Both words occur several times in the book. As with so many other themes, the extent of Revelation's connections to temple and priesthood increases significantly for the interpreter who is attentive to John's many allusions to the Old Testament (OT). In Revelation, temple and priesthood both have to do with typology and the fulfillment of OT types. It is impossible in a brief essay to deal adequately with both temple and priesthood, although they are intertwined. Therefore, I will concentrate my attention on the priestly elements of Revelation, while touching on relevant aspects of the book's temple theme. Given the book's many priestly elements, it is prudent to focus attention even further to include those elements that have to do with the people of God as his priests or priestly servants. The people of God's role as priests has aspects that relate to both realized (the already) and consummated (the not yet) eschatology. It seems best to begin by examining John's three uses of the term priests. Then, I will look at John's presentation of the priesthood of the people of God in the future, after the return of Jesus. This is the logical way to proceed because the future aspects of their priesthood are more developed and will shed light upon their priestly

service in the present time. The third section of the paper will synthesize what Revelation suggests about the priestly service of the people of God in the present time. In the fourth section, I will look briefly at other priestly figures in the book, like angels and Jesus himself, and suggest a few connections between the priestly roles of these figures and the priestly roles of the people of God. As this essay will show, Revelation portrays the people of God as his priests, who begin serving him now and who will have the privilege of serving him forever in the New Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

### **“PRIESTS” IN REVELATION**

The term “priests” occurs three times in Revelation, all with respect to the people of God (1:6; 5:10; 20:6). In all three cases, the mention of “priests” is part of an allusion to Exodus 19:6. These are not isolated allusions. Rather, Revelation 1:6 and 5:10 are the beginning of a common pattern. In Revelation, the priesthood of God’s people has multiple connections to the Exodus from Egypt, the covenant at Mount Sinai, and the setting apart of priests for dedicated service to God later on in Exodus.<sup>2</sup> The coherence of these connections will become clearer below.

Revelation 1:6 follows immediately after the end of Revelation 1:5, which says, “To the one who loves us and set us free from our sins by his blood.” Through the Passover, the people of God were freed from Egypt. As the antitype to the Passover lamb, the blood of Jesus sets his people free from bondage to their sins.<sup>3</sup> When Jesus sets people free from slavery to their sins, he simultaneously sets them apart to become priestly servants of God under the new covenant. Revelation 1:6a provides initial evidence for this transition from slavery to priestly service. It says, “And made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.” Revelation 1:6a contributes to the Exodus typology of Revelation 1:5-6 through its allusion to Exodus 19:6. In Exodus 19:1-24:11, God enters into a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai just after the Exodus from Egypt. In Exodus 19:6, God says that his people will be his “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” What does the title “priests” indicate about Israel? It probably indicates that when Israel enters into covenant with God, she becomes God’s holy servants rather than servants of Pharaoh.<sup>4</sup> Revelation 1:6 picks up the combination of “kingdom” and “priests” from Exodus 19:6. In continuity with Israel, the new covenant people of God are

his priestly servants who have also been freed from slavery. However, it is the blood of the Lamb that has secured their freedom (Rev 1:5).

In Revelation 5:10, “priests” occurs along with “kingdom” for a second time. Once again, “priests” and “kingdom” occur right after another significant Exodus allusion. Revelation 5:9b says, “Because you were slain and purchased people for God with your blood from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.” The slaying of the Lamb to purchase people for God presents him as the fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice. These words recall the Passover and the Exodus, when God purchased or redeemed Israel (Exod 15:16; Ps 74:2). God redeemed them so they might be his “kingdom of priests,” that is, his servants (Exod 19:6). At the first Passover, God delivered all of the firstborn sons from death through the Passover sacrifice. As a result, the lives of the firstborn sons belong to God and his service (Exod 13:2, 11-16; 22:28). In other words, the Passover sacrifice sanctified the firstborn sons, that is, it set them apart for God’s service (Num 8:17). It is important to remember that the firstborn sons represent the nation of Israel as a whole. Back in Exodus 4:22-23, God indicates that Israel, his people, is his firstborn son and that he wants his son to be free in order to serve him. If Israel as a whole is God’s firstborn son, then the sanctification of the firstborn sons at Passover time is an event that anticipates or foreshadows the sanctification of Israel for God’s service at Mount Sinai. At that place, Israel gathered before him and God sanctified his people for his service with the “blood of the covenant” (Exod 19:6; 24:3-8). As a result, they belong to God. They are his “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” (Exod 19:6). Evidently, then, one aspect of God’s grand design for the Passover is to redeem, or purchase, servants for himself. Initially, he purchases the firstborn sons, but his fuller plan is to purchase Israel, his firstborn son, for his service.<sup>5</sup>

When the Lamb purchased a people for God with his blood, he simultaneously set them apart to become priestly servants of God. The close connection between Revelation 5:9 and 5:10 supports this claim. Revelation 5:10 says, “And you have made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they will reign upon the earth.” In fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice, the Lamb purchases servants for God (5:9) and sanctifies them for God’s service (5:10). Revelation 5:10 gives two titles for God’s servants, namely, “kingdom” and “priests.” One aspect of their service to God involves reigning with him (5:9; 20:6; 22:5). In the OT, God’s priests are his privileged

servants, that is, they are special servants of God in the midst of Israel. They are sanctified, or set apart, for this special service. In Revelation, as in the NT generally, all of the people of God are elevated to the role of priests for God. By the blood of the Lamb, the entire people of God become priests who ultimately fulfill God's desire for his covenant people to be his "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation" (Exod 19:6).

The people of God become his priests when they receive the benefits of the blood of the Lamb, but important aspects of their service to God relate to the future. The final mention of priests in Revelation occurs in Revelation 20:6. After rising from the dead, the people of God "will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years" (20:6). During the millennium, the "priests of God and of Christ" begin their reign with God, and it will continue into eternity (22:5). Taken as a whole, the book of Revelation gives more explicit attention to the future of the people of God as his priests than to their priestly service in the present. Therefore, it seems best to look at the priesthood of the people of God in the future before looking at their priesthood in the present. Their future priesthood will shed light upon their priestly service in the present.

### **THE FUTURE SERVICE OF THE PRIESTS OF GOD**

It should not be surprising that the future service of God's priests is a prominent aspect of Revelation's priesthood theme. One common aspect of Revelation is a tendency to direct the attention of the people of God to the future and to the rewards of those who remain faithful to God in the present. God and the Lamb promise their faithful people an eternal inheritance that far outstrips anything that the people of the Devil and the Beast will inherit. For example, each one of the seven letters to the seven churches contains a promise to the faithful people of God concerning their future in the New Jerusalem. Part of the inheritance of the people of God is the privilege of serving him as his priests in the New Jerusalem. Revelation 7 and 14 contain previews of the priestly service of God's people in the New Jerusalem. The final portrayal of the future service and privileges of God's priests occurs in Revelation 22:1-4. Therefore, I will look at aspects of Revelation 7, 14, and 22 to construct an overview of the future of the priests of God.

### ***Revelation 7***

Revelation 7:14-15 is located within Revelation 7:9-17, which is a passage that provides an extended preview of the glorious future of the people of God. Just prior to Revelation 7:9-17, Revelation 7:1-8 portrays the placing of a seal upon the forehead of the servants of God so that they might be kept safe from God's twenty-one judgments. The seal upon the forehead has significant priestly connections, which we will consider below. While the sealing precedes God's judgment, the scene portrayed in Revelation 7:9-17 occurs on the other side of God's judgment, after Jesus conquers the Beast (19:11-21). The people of God wear white robes and celebrate the coming of God's salvation (7:9-10). In Revelation 7:13, one of the elders asks John about the figures in the white robes before telling John about them in Revelation 7:14-15.

Revelation 7:14 says, "These are the ones who come from the great tribulation and they have washed their robes and they have made them white with the blood of the Lamb." These words begin the portrayal of God's people as his priests, a portrayal that carries over into Revelation 7:15.<sup>6</sup> In the OT, priests are privileged to be servants of God who are able to serve him in his tabernacle and, later on, in his temple. Before Aaron and his sons can enter the tabernacle and perform their priestly service there, they, and their robes, must be sanctified (or made holy) by means of a sacrifice (Exod 29; Lev 8). Through a special ritual of sanctification, they and their robes are transferred from a state of unholiness into a state of holiness. At the same moment and through the same ritual, they and their robes are cleansed from uncleanness or impurity because holy things must also be clean or pure.<sup>7</sup> Revelation 7:14 probably alludes to Exodus 29:21 and Leviticus 8:30.<sup>8</sup> Both of these verses speak about the sanctification of the robes of the priests by means of the blood of a sacrifice. Consequently, in light of the allusion to Exodus 29:21 and Leviticus 8:30, the saints wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb in preparation for approaching God's throne and serving him (Rev 7:14-15).<sup>9</sup> They wash their robes by believing in Jesus and receiving the benefits of his sacrificial death. Only the blood of the Lamb can perfectly cleanse them from sin so that they can approach God's throne (7:15). Perfect cleansing is available only to those who both believe in Jesus and persevere in faith and obedience to God's commands (14:12). In the Sardis letter, Jesus promises the faithful conquerors that they will be clothed in white garments (3:4-5).

These are the true people of God who wash their robes and make them white in the Lamb's blood.<sup>10</sup>

Revelation 7:14-15 is near the beginning of a section that has important parallels to the story of Israel (7:13-17). Israel leaves Egypt by means of the Exodus and, in the wilderness, her priests begin to serve God in the tabernacle. At the time of the Exodus, God sends Moses to deliver Israel from their "affliction" or "tribulation" in Egypt (Exod 3:7-8, 17; 4:31). In his conflict with Pharaoh, God repeatedly commands Pharaoh to let his people go so that they might serve him (for example, Exod 4:23; 8:1). As several verses make clear, their service to God is to begin in the wilderness with celebrating a festival to God and offering sacrifices (Exod 5:1-3; 8:25-29). This is the type of service to God that one would expect from a people who are to become God's "kingdom of priests" and his "holy nation" at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:6). Due to Pharaoh's resistance to letting them go, the people offer Passover sacrifices and celebrate their first festival to God while they are still in Egypt. Through the first Passover, God delivers his people from death and from slavery to Pharaoh. After their deliverance, they praise God in the wilderness (Exod 15) and later construct a tabernacle, where God dwells with them and his priests serve him (Exod 29:44-46). With the blood of a sacrifice, God sanctifies Aaron and his sons to serve him as his priests (Exod 29:1-37, 44). In the midst of Israel, the priests are God's special servants who can draw near to him in his tabernacle and serve him there.

Revelation 7:14 contains two parallels to the story of Israel summarized above. First, the people of God have just come out of "the great tribulation," which corresponds to the "affliction" or "tribulation" of Israel in Egypt.<sup>11</sup> One might refer to their experience as a new Exodus. Second, having escaped from tribulation, the people of God have washed their robes in the Lamb's blood, which prepares them to serve God as his priests. Next, the first part of Revelation 7:15 speaks about their priestly service to God. It says, "On account of this, they are before the throne of God and are serving him day and night in his temple, and the one who sits on the throne will place his tabernacle over them" (7:15). When the speaker says that the saints are before God's throne and "serving" (*latreuō*) God "in his temple," he is portraying the saints in the role of priests.<sup>12</sup> In the OT, priests approach God in his tabernacle or temple to serve him there (Exod 29:1, 44; Heb 9:6). God's temple is the place where his throne is (Ezek 43:7). Revelation 7:15

is a reference to the service of the people of God in the New Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> That is where the people of God will ultimately serve him before his throne, according to Revelation 22:1-4.

### ***Revelation 14***

After Revelation 7, the next preview of the future of God's priests occurs in Revelation 14:1-5. These verses contain significant links to Revelation 5:9-10 and to Revelation 7. As in Revelation 5:9, the people of God are those whom God has purchased (14:3-4). These whom God has purchased are worshipping him on Mount Zion (14:1-3). In this instance, Mount Zion is probably a unique reference to the location of the New Jerusalem, which fulfills the roles of both the Jerusalem temple and of Jerusalem itself.<sup>14</sup> Like the 144,000 servants of God in Revelation 7:3-8, the number of the people of God in Revelation 14:1 is 144,000. The number 144,000 probably refers to the people of God in all of its fullness.<sup>15</sup> In Revelation 7:1-8, their foreheads are marked with a seal. In Revelation 14:1, they have the name of the Lamb and of "his Father" upon their foreheads. The seal and the names upon their foreheads are probably identical. Both are probably related to priesthood and especially to the high priests, as we will see below.

Revelation 14:1 introduces the names on the foreheads by saying, "And I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with him were 144,000, who were having his name and the name of his Father written upon their foreheads." The names of the Lamb and the Father are a mark of ownership. These people belong to God, that is, they are his special possession and his servants. As Revelation 7:13-17 already made plain, the people of God are his priestly servants. They are the fulfillment of God's description of his people as his "kingdom of priests and holy nation" in Exodus 19:6. Exodus 19:5 expresses a related idea, when God refers to his people as his "possession." God's servants belong exclusively to him and they are not to serve any other gods. The OT is very clear about this (e.g., Deut 6:13-15). God's exclusive claims over his servants would appear to be related to the plaque that the high priest wears on his forehead in the OT. The only time that the OT speaks about God's name on someone's forehead occurs in Moses' description of the high priest's special clothing. Over his forehead, he wears a plaque with a "seal" on it that says, "Holy to the Lord" (Exod 28:36).<sup>16</sup> These words proclaim that the high priest is uniquely holy.

In other words, in the midst of Israel, God's holy nation (Exod 19:6), the high priest is uniquely set apart to the Lord and his service. He belongs to the Lord in a special way.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, he is the holy representative of the twelve tribes, whose names he wears (Exod 28:12, 29). He serves the Lord on their behalf so that they and their offerings might "find favor" with the Lord (Exod 28:38).<sup>18</sup> The high priest represents the ideal with respect to being a servant of the Lord. As one who is uniquely "holy to the Lord," he has the privilege of approaching the Lord in his tabernacle, even of entering into the Holy of Holies (Lev 16; Heb 9:7).

Revelation's portrayal of the people of God suggests that God elevates all of the people of the New Jerusalem to a point where they attain to and surpass the ideal represented by the high priest.<sup>19</sup> Like the high priest, they have robes sanctified by blood, but their robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, rather than in the blood of a sacrificial animal (7:14). In the New Jerusalem, they have access to God's true throne rather than to the tabernacle's Holy of Holies (22:1-4). Thus, one can see why it would be appropriate to relate God's name (or seal) on their forehead (7:2-3; 14:1; 22:4) to the name (or seal) on the forehead of the high priest.<sup>20</sup> This is an aspect of Revelation's typology of priesthood. They are truly "holy to the Lord" in a way that surpasses even the high priests who served in the tabernacle and the temple.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Revelation 22***

Revelation 7 and Revelation 14:1-5 anticipate the final description of the priestly people of God in Revelation 22:1-5. According to Revelation 22:1-2, the New Jerusalem contains God's throne, which is not housed within a temple building as it was in the OT. Instead, the entire city is God's temple.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the cubic dimensions of the city suggest that the entire city is the new Holy of Holies, where God dwells.<sup>23</sup> Revelation 22:3-4 are important verses with respect to the future service and privileges of God's priests.

Concerning the New Jerusalem, Revelation 22:3 says, "And the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will serve him." The phrase "his servants will serve him" provides one of the few indications about what the people of God will be doing in the New Jerusalem (22:3). "Servants of God" is a common way to refer to the people of God in the OT.<sup>24</sup> God's people are supposed to serve him and him only (Exod 20:3-5; Deut



6:13). The people of the New Jerusalem offer to God what he has always wanted from his people, that is, their faithful, devoted service. Never again will anyone who claims to be a servant of God play the harlot by serving other gods or idols, as some in the seven churches were still doing (Rev 2:14; 3:20). The verb translated “serve” (*latreuō*) in Revelation 22:3 is reserved in the Septuagint and in the NT for religious service to either God or to false gods. Because of this, it is often translated “worship.”<sup>25</sup>

“His servants will serve him” is a reiteration of Revelation 7:15. As noted above, the future service of the people of God is related to the fulfillment of the Exodus and to their role as God’s priests. Similarly, in Revelation 22:3, God’s people are finally able to serve God freely and joyfully in the New Jerusalem because God has delivered them from the oppression of the Dragon and the Beast. Their service to God before his throne in the New Jerusalem is the priestly service that Revelation 7:15 already spoke about. In Revelation 7:14-15, God’s “servants” (7:3) are “before the throne of God and are serving him day and night in his temple” (7:15). Serving God before his throne and in his temple is clearly priestly service.<sup>26</sup> The New Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22 contains God’s throne; it is the “temple” that Revelation 7:15 anticipates. Therefore, to be God’s servants is also to be his priests. These are both terms for the people of God in Revelation and it appears that they are related terms.<sup>27</sup> The people of God are all his priestly servants. This is quite an honor for both Gentiles and those Jews who are not from the tribe of Levi. It is an honor that goes beyond OT expectations, although Isaiah does appear to foresee a place for Gentiles to serve as priests and Levites.<sup>28</sup>

The honor of serving God before his throne is the first honor for the people of the New Jerusalem. Further honors occur in Revelation 22:4. Revelation 22:4 says, “And they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.” Seeing God’s face is perhaps the greatest and most anticipated honor for the people of the New Jerusalem. Throughout the Bible, some of God’s greatest servants have been privileged with partial visions of God’s glory. One thinks immediately of Moses in Exodus 33:18-23, where God promises Moses a glimpse of his glory. Yet God tells Moses that he cannot see his face because the one who sees God will die (Exod 33:20, 23). Moses’ vision of God was so partial that John can confidently say, “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18). Both parts of Revelation 22:4 probably relate to the fulfillment of the priesthood. The first part indicates a contrast with the high priest of the OT.

He entered the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. When he did so, he had to do so with a cloud of incense that covered the mercy seat of the ark, or risk death (Lev 16:13). His death would presumably be the result of seeing God too directly.<sup>29</sup> The ark's mercy seat is the place of God's throne in the temple (2 Kgs 19:15). As the antitype to the OT priests, the priestly servants of the New Jerusalem can approach God's true throne and see God's face. The high priest was a unique servant of God with unique access to the Holy of Holies. In the New Jerusalem, all of God's people are privileged servants of God with access to God's throne that surpasses even that of the high priest.<sup>30</sup> They also wear the name of God on their foreheads (Rev 22:4), which was unique to the high priest in the OT (Exod 28:36-38).

Taken together, Revelation 7, 14, and 22 portray significant aspects of the priesthood of the people of God in the New Jerusalem. Having been delivered from "great tribulation," the people of God will be his priests with holy robes that they have washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:14). All of God's people enjoy the privilege of serving God as his priests in the New Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, they experience the fullness of God's design for his people to be his "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6).<sup>32</sup> As his priests, they will serve him before his throne (7:15; 22:3). They have privileges that resemble and even surpass the privileges of the high priests of the OT. They wear God's name as a seal upon their foreheads (14:1; 22:4). As they serve God, they have the great privilege of seeing his face without fear because they are perfectly holy (22:4). The great privileges of the priests of the New Jerusalem are supposed to create a sense of expectation and anticipation in the hearts of the people of God. This reward is not for everyone. God reserves this reward for those who live as his priestly servants in the here and now. What do God's priestly servants look like prior to the New Jerusalem?

### **THE PRIESTS OF GOD IN THE PRESENT TIME**

At several points, Revelation points to a priesthood for the people of God that begins now. The nature of that priesthood is not well-developed, but John gives some indications about what God desires from his priests in the present time. Like their future, their present should be devoted to service to God. The primary component of their service to God is obedience to his commandments. On the basis of Revelation 11, one could also add that his

priestly servants are his worshipers and his witnesses.

It will be helpful to begin with a few of Revelation's pointers to the idea that God's people are already his priests. According to Revelation 1:6 and 5:10, the Lamb is responsible for establishing a people for God who are both his kingdom and his priests. There is no indication that this kingdom or priesthood is limited to the future. His purchase of people for God is related to the cross (1:5; 5:9). Presumably, then, the people of the Lamb become God's priests when they receive the benefits of his blood, that is, his sacrificial death. The timing for the sealing of the servants of God provides support for this point because the sealing of Revelation 7:3 takes place after the death of the Lamb, but before the twenty-one plagues, from which the seal protects God's people. The sealing takes place after the death of the Lamb because the people of the Lamb are the ones who have been purchased with his blood in order to become his priests (5:9-10). They are the 144,000 servants of God who receive his seal in Revelation 7:3. As indicated above, the seal on their foreheads is the names of God and the Lamb (14:1; 22:4). The twenty-one plagues begin with the plagues of the seven seals. The plagues of the first four seals are unique in the midst of the twenty-one plagues because they appear to begin shortly after the exaltation of Jesus and continue until the time right before Jesus comes back.<sup>33</sup> If so, then the sealing of Revelation 7:3 belongs to the past and the present rather than to the future.<sup>34</sup> The people of God already carry a seal upon their foreheads, which marks them as God's priests and protects them from his plagues.

Due to the blood of the Lamb, the people of God are already his holy ones and his priests prior to their entry into the New Jerusalem (Rev 5:10; 13:7; 17:6).<sup>35</sup> Yet their current holiness is incomplete, as the seven letters to the seven churches show (Rev 2-3). We will look briefly at the Sardis letter, since it appears to relate to the priestly nature of God's people in the present time. In contrast to the sinners at Sardis, Revelation 3:4 refers to the few people at Sardis "who have not defiled their garments." These are the faithful, obedient servants of Jesus at Sardis. When Jesus sees them, he sees spiritual garments that are pure. They will be rewarded when Jesus comes back, for "they are worthy" (3:4). Their reward will be to "walk with me in white garments" (3:4). This promise of being with Christ and having white garments anticipates Revelation 7:14-15, where all of the faithful servants of the Lamb will one day dwell with him and serve him as his priests. Like

the robes of the OT priests, they will have robes cleansed with the blood of a sacrifice. Their robes will one day be perfectly white and clean because they have received the benefits of the blood of the perfect sacrifice, the Lamb of God. Therefore, the faithful ones at Sardis will one day join all of the Lamb's faithful conquerors in perfectly white robes that have been washed in the Lamb's blood (7:14).<sup>36</sup>

The Sardis letter provides an important clue regarding the nature of the priestly service of the people of God in the present time. Those who "have not defiled their garments" are maintaining their purity by their perseverance in obedience to God's commandments (3:4). Due to their obedience, they are maintaining a purity of life that is worthy of reward in the future. Their service to God in the present time takes the form of obedience to God's commandments. This is true for the seven letters of Revelation 2-3 as a whole. Jesus' words to the churches confirm that he is calling the churches to be obedient to God's commandments.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Revelation 14:12 makes an important ethical statement that characterizes the ethics of the book of Revelation. It shows what God desires from his priests, his servants, in the present time. Revelation 14:12 says, "Here is the perseverance of the saints, who are keeping the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus." Notice that faith and obedience belong together. God's commandments show his people how to love and serve him. Those who truly have faith in Jesus demonstrate that they are the people of God through their obedience.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to obedience to God's commandments, Revelation 11 suggests two additional elements to the current priesthood of believers. Revelation 11:1 introduces a temple of God that John is told to measure. Interestingly, John is instructed to measure the worshipers in the temple along with the temple building. The measuring of the worshipers is without precedent in the OT parallels. The measuring of the worshipers indicates that they enjoy the security of the measured area, that is, the temple of God. They are secure in God's sanctuary. These worshipers are the people of God, who are already approaching God in his temple and worshipping him. Unfortunately, the people of God are also citizens of the "holy city" of Revelation 11:2. This city is being oppressed by the nations for forty-two months, which refers to Revelation's period of persecution that actually extends from the exaltation of Jesus (12:5) to his second coming

(19:11-21).<sup>39</sup> The paradox of Revelation 11:1-2 is that God's people are both secure with God and vulnerable to persecution and death, because they are simultaneously worshipers in God's temple and the people of his holy city.<sup>40</sup> As worshipers in God's temple, they are currently serving him as his priests. As his witnesses in the world, they are vulnerable to persecution and death (11:3-10). Their security is actually much more significant than their vulnerability. The worst that the Dragon and the Beast can do to them is take their lives (11:7). In truth, they are secure with God, whom they worship, as Revelation 11:11-12 will show.

The witnesses of Revelation 11:3-12 may also have a priestly connection due to an allusion to Zechariah 4. In Revelation 11:4, the two witnesses are introduced as "the two olive trees and the two lampstands who stand before the Lord of the earth." The two olive trees and two lampstands standing before the Lord is an allusion to Zechariah's vision of a lampstand and two olive trees "who stand by the Lord of the whole earth" (Zech 4:11-14). In Zechariah's vision, the two olive trees are God's two special servants, the ruler from David's line (Zerubbabel) and the high priest (Joshua). Zerubbabel will accomplish God's work of building the temple by the power of the Spirit (4:6). In the temple, Joshua will perform his service to the Lord (3:7). In Revelation 11:4, the two olive trees are God's servants, his witnesses, who are empowered by the Spirit to do his work. By describing them as "the two lampstands," John connects them to the people of God, because the seven lampstands are the seven churches in John's earlier vision (Rev 2:20).<sup>41</sup> Revelation 11:4's allusion to Zechariah 4 would appear to suggest a relationship between God's witnesses and his two anointed servants, namely, the Davidic ruler and the high priest. The justification for this relationship could arise from Revelation's presentation of the people of God. They are rulers, who will rule with God (5:10; 22:5) and his priests, who serve him (5:10; 22:3). If so, then, the witnesses of Revelation 11:3-10 are serving God as his priests by carrying out their work of prophesying and testifying to the nations (11:3, 7).

In conclusion, one of the significant themes of Revelation is the obedience of the people of God to his commandments. Revelation 14:12 provides one example of this emphasis. One of the major ways that God's priests serve him in the present time is by keeping his commandments. God's commandments instruct the people of God in how to serve him. The Lamb promises glorious

rewards to the faithful servants of God in his seven letters to the churches. In addition, Revelation 7:14-15 and 22:3 promise that part of their reward will be the privilege of serving God as his priests in the New Jerusalem. Those who serve God faithfully in the present will experience the joys of serving God forevermore. According to the interpretation of Revelation 11:1-12 given above, God's worshipers and witnesses are also priestly servants of God, who are currently serving God by their worship and by their testifying.

### **THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PRIESTLY FIGURES IN REVELATION**

The people of God are not the only figures who have priestly characteristics and functions in Revelation. Two other priestly figures are Jesus, the Son of Man of Revelation 1-3, and the angels of God who bring about God's plagues by burning incense (8:3-5), blowing seven trumpets (8:1-11:19), and pouring out seven bowls (15:1-16:21). In Revelation 1:9-20, Jesus is a priestly figure due to his robe and golden sash and his location in the midst of the lampstands (1:13). Revelation 1:13 would appear to present Jesus in the role of the high priest. The symbolism is fitting, since it appears that Jesus is like the high priest in that he is tending to the seven lampstands.<sup>42</sup> The seven lampstands are the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. The angel of Revelation 8:3-5 is clearly a priestly figure, since he burns incense at God's incense altar in his temple. He then casts his censer down to the earth (8:5). The angels with the seven trumpets are priestly figures because they are like the seven priests who sounded their trumpets at the fall of Jericho (Josh 6:4, 20). Finally, the angels who pour out the seven bowls are priestly figures due to their clothing (15:6) and the role that they play. They come out of God's temple and receive golden bowls, which priests normally use to pour out drink offerings (Exod 25:29). Their golden bowls are full of the wrath of God, which is related to wine in Revelation 14:18-20.<sup>43</sup> These priestly figures all have something in common. They are all performing priestly service. This observation is not all that profound, but it is significant. The people of God are his priests who carry out their priestly service to God in the present and in the New Jerusalem. In doing so, they have the privilege of sharing in the work of God, along with such esteemed servants of God as Jesus himself and the angels of God. It is

truly an honor to be in God's service as his priests.

## SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

The priesthood theme of Revelation is a theme with significant and exciting implications for the people of God. The people of God are his priestly servants whom he has purchased for his service (Rev 1:6; 5:10). Their role as his priests will reach its culmination in the New Jerusalem, where they will serve God and see his face (7:14-15; 22:3-4). The faithful people of God can anticipate the glorious honor of a type of service to God with benefits that surpass those enjoyed by the high priests of the tabernacle and the temple. Their future priesthood is related to their present service. They begin to offer their priestly service to God in the present by obeying his commandments, worshipping God alone, and being his witnesses. God's priestly servants already bear the name of God and of the Lamb on their foreheads (7:1-8). They show by their faithful service to God that they are servants of God rather than servants of the Devil and the Beast. The Lamb promises to reward his faithful servants with the white garments of the priests of the New Jerusalem (3:5; 7:14). As seen in Revelation 14:12, faith and obedience belong together. Those who truly believe in Jesus will serve God by obeying God's commandments. These are the true servants of God who serve him both now and forever.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay on priesthood in Revelation is essentially an attempt to compile, distill, and develop insights from my commentary on Revelation. See Paul M. Hoskins, *The Book of Revelation: A Theological and Exegetical Commentary* (Charleston: Christodoulos, 2017). The most thorough treatment of priesthood in Revelation is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Priester für Gott: Studien zum Herrschafts- und Priestermotiv in der Apokalypse* (NTAbh 7; Münster: Aschendorff, 1972). I have consulted her work extensively and I have found it to be a useful starting point for my own work on Revelation's priesthood theme.

<sup>2</sup> Notice that all three of these events are related to a sacrifice.

<sup>3</sup> Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 62; Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* (trans. Wendy Pradels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 119; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott*, 281-2; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 35. See John 8:34, where Jesus says, "The one who practices sin is a slave to sin." Jesus, the Lamb of God, came to set people free (John 1:29; 8:32, 36).

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 227; Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty* (NSBT 15; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 101; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott*, 142.

<sup>5</sup> This paragraph summarizes points that I make in *That Scripture Might Be Fulfilled: Typology and the Death of Christ* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2009), 86-97. Essentially the same summary appears in my commentary



- (Hoskins, *Revelation*, 267). The purchasing language occurs again in Rev 14:4.
- <sup>6</sup> The comments on Rev 7:14-15 below are an edited version of my comments on these verses in Hoskins, *Revelation*, 157-60.
  - <sup>7</sup> See Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 19, 26.
  - <sup>8</sup> In terms of unique verbal connections, Rev 7:14 shares “blood” and the same word for “robes” with Exod 29:21 and Lev 8:30. Also, Exod 29:21 and Lev 8:30 are the only OT verses that speak about the sanctification of the priests’ robes. One might object that sanctification is different from washing one’s robes with blood. However, closer examination shows that cleansing with blood and sanctifying (or making holy) with blood are closely related concepts in the Bible’s theology of sacrifice (see Lev 8:15, 16:19; Heb 9:13; Hoskins, *That Scripture Might Be Fulfilled*, 70, 125). On Lev 8:30, see Wenham, *Leviticus*, 143. It is interesting that Beale is one of the few interpreters to suggest a connection between Rev 7:14 and Exod 29:21/Lev 8:30 (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 440; see also David Aune’s more general comments in *Revelation* 6-16 [WBC 52B; Nashville: Nelson, 1998], 475; and Smalley, *Revelation*, 197). This oversight is probably due to a tendency to neglect (or undervalue) the relevance of the OT theology of sacrifice for Revelation and for NT theology in general. Schüssler Fiorenza notes the relevance of Exod 29:4 (washing Aaron and his sons with water) for Rev 7:14 (*Priester für Gott*, 395). Exodus connections are also present in Rev 7:10.
  - <sup>9</sup> Beale later returns to the priestly connotations of the saints’ robes (*Revelation*, 961). It may also be relevant to note that God instructed Moses to have the people wash their garments before they met with the Lord at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:10) (Beale, *Revelation*, 439-440).
  - <sup>10</sup> For more on the saints’ washing of their robes, see my comments on Rev 22:14 in Hoskins, *Revelation*. See also Beale, *Revelation*, 436, 438; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 147; Philip E. Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation: A Commentary* (PNTC; Schüssler Fiorenza: Eerdmans, 1990), 98; Gerhard Maier, *Die Offenbarung Des Johannes Kapitel 1-11* (HTA; Witten: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2009), 369.
  - <sup>11</sup> In the LXX of Exod 4:31, the translator uses *thlipsis* (“tribulation”), which one also finds in Rev 7:14. See Jan Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and Their Developments* (JSNTSup 93; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 167.
  - <sup>12</sup> The Greek word *latreuō* (“serve” or “worship”) is associated with worshipping God in the NT (see esp. Luke 2:37) and with the service of priests in Heb 8:5; 13:10. It is also the verb that the LXX uses in Exodus when God says that he desires for his people to serve him (see above and Exod 4:23). Thus, in biblical Greek, the word is reserved for service to God (or for serving other gods as in Deut 4:19), which is why it is often translated as “worship.” For further comments on this important verb, see my comments on Rev 22:3 below.
  - <sup>13</sup> For the New Jerusalem as the fulfillment of the temple, see my comments on Rev 21-22 in Hoskins, *Revelation*.
  - <sup>14</sup> Hoskins, *Revelation*, 262. The allusion to Ezek 20:40 in Rev 14:1-5 helps to explain the mention of Mount Zion (*ibid.*, 263).
  - <sup>15</sup> The 144,000 here are the same 144,000 that John introduced in Rev 7:4-8. On the number 144,000 with reference to the people of God, see Hoskins, *Revelation*, 151-2.
  - <sup>16</sup> Interpreters note that Philo and Josephus generally refer to God’s name (“Lord”) on the high priest’s forehead and leave out any mention of “Holy to the” before it (for examples, see Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.178; Philo, *On the Life of Moses* 2.132; William Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB; New York: Doubleday, 2006], 448). See the exception to this in Philo, *Migration of Abraham* 1.103.
  - <sup>17</sup> Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 516-7; Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 448. See also Cassuto, *Exodus*, 385.
  - <sup>18</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, 384-5.
  - <sup>19</sup> See Beale, *Revelation*, 1114; also, Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott*, 384-9.
  - <sup>20</sup> In the LXX of Exod 28:36, the Greek refers to the words engraved on the high priest’s gold plaque as a “seal” (*sphragis*). The same word is used for God’s seal in Rev. 7:2.
  - <sup>21</sup> These comments on Rev 14:1 are an edited version of Hoskins, *Revelation*, 259-261.
  - <sup>22</sup> See Hoskins, *Revelation*, 430. I make this point several times in my treatment of Rev 21-22.
  - <sup>23</sup> See 1 Kgs 6:20 and Hoskins, *Revelation*, 445.
  - <sup>24</sup> This is true across the OT, for examples, see Lev 25:55; Deut 32:36; Ezra 5:11; Neh 1:6; Ps 79:2; Isa 65:9. It is also important to note that important figures in the OT, like Abraham, Moses, and David are called God’s servant.
  - <sup>25</sup> See BDAG, s.v. *latreuō* and Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 773.
  - <sup>26</sup> The word *latreuō* (“serve”) occurs in Rev. 7:15 and 22:3. Some interpreters, like Schüssler Fiorenza, point



out that *latreuō* is not the verb associated with the service of priests in the LXX (*Priester für Gott*, 379-80; Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices* [3rd ed.; London: Macmillan, 1908], 103-4). It normally reserves the verb *leitourgeō* ("serve" or "minister") for the service of priests in the temple. However, this distinction does not hold in the NT. While *leitourgeō* refers to the service of OT priests in Heb 10:11, *latreuō* is also used for the service of priests in Heb 8:5 and 13:10. For further discussion of the use of *latreuō* (and related words) for priestly service in the NT, see H. Strathmann's article on "*latreuō, latreia*" in Kittel's *TDNT* (vol. 4, p. 63).

- <sup>27</sup> God's people are his priests in Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6 and his servants (or slaves) in Rev 1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 19:2, 5; 22:3. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott*, 379; Osborne, *Revelation*, 773.
- <sup>28</sup> See Swete, *Apocalypse*, 104. Also, see Isa 66:21 (along with 56:6 and 61:6) and John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 690, 460. Oswalt notes that the OT priesthood is fundamentally a calling to be a servant of God (p. 460). David Mathewson relates Isa 66:21 to Rev 22:5b, but his comments would apply to Rev 22:3 as well (*A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation 21.1-22.5* [JSNTSup; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003], 213-4.).
- <sup>29</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus*, 231. See also Heb 9:7-8.
- <sup>30</sup> See also Smalley, *Revelation*, 565. My treatment of Revelation 22:3-4 is an edited and condensed version of the comments found in Hoskins, *Revelation*, 460-3.
- <sup>31</sup> Notice that Rev 7:3 and 22:3 refer to the people of God as his servants. The priestly role of God's people involves service to God. This is consistent with the OT's teaching concerning both priesthood and what it means to be the true people of God (they are God's servants). See Cassuto, *Exodus*, 227 (on Exod 19:6).
- <sup>32</sup> It is important to recall that Exod 19:6 occurs in the context of God meeting with Israel at Mount Sinai and entering into a covenant with them (Exod 19-24). See also Ezek 20:40.
- <sup>33</sup> See Hoskins, *Revelation*, 138-42.
- <sup>34</sup> Although Rev 7:3 is describing a sealing that took place in the past, the theology of Revelation would tend to suggest that this sealing anticipates the ongoing sealing of God's people, which continues until the present time. Whenever people receive the saving benefits of the blood of Jesus, they become people of the Lamb who are sealed with his name. As a result, they clearly belong to the Lamb rather than to the Beast, whose people bear his name on their foreheads (13:16-17).
- <sup>35</sup> See Heb 9:7-14; 10:19-22.
- <sup>36</sup> See comments on Rev 7:14-15 above and see Rev 22:14 (and 3:18). On Revelation 3:4, see Hughes, *Revelation*, 55-57; Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: MacMillan, 1919), 475. My comments on Rev 3:4 come from Hoskins, *Revelation*, 104.
- <sup>37</sup> See, for example, Rev 2:4-5 and 2:20.
- <sup>38</sup> In 1 John, one finds several cases where John closely links faith (or believing in Jesus) to keeping God's commandments (3:23-24; 5:1-5). See also James 2:14-26.
- <sup>39</sup> See Hoskins, *Revelation*, 191-3.
- <sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, 187-90.
- <sup>41</sup> This interpretation of Revelation 11:4 comes from Hoskins, *Revelation*, 196. See also Beckwith, *Apocalypse*, 593; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 218; Smalley, *Revelation*, 277. John is not bound by his source in Zech 4, where the single lampstand appears to represent the Jerusalem Temple. Rev 11:4 has only two lampstands because there are two witnesses who represent the church as a whole. The relationship between Zechariah's two olive trees and John's two olive trees appears to be a typological relationship.
- <sup>42</sup> See Hoskins, *Revelation*, 60-61.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 492-3.