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Conquering Jerusalem and its Temple

Reactions to priesthood and its power in the Holy City in Middle Judaism

Since the return from exile, the temple of Jerusalem was synonymous to religious, political and economic power. Even if the priests that ran it were rarely the masters of the political situation as well, up until the destruction of the holy city by the Romans in 70 a.C. they held an indisputable religious authority on all the Jews and, as happens almost always in antiquity, this went step by step with political influence. The various occupiers of the region (Persians, Macedonians and Romans) knew this well, and supported the local priesthood in order to keep social peace in the land of Israel. The control of the temple, therefore, had not only religious implications, but political ones as well.

Here we will study how Jerusalem became progressively the center of religious life in Israel, replacing the local sanctuaries, as well as how the priests took the place of the king in its administration: for this reason, from the Persian era up until the destruction in 70 A.D. religious and political dissent in Judaism usually expressed itself in terms of aspiration for control of the temple itself or of what it represented in spiritual terms. When, in the Persian era, the priestly families making reference to Zadok as their forbearer had full control, the opposition they faced expressed itself mainly in two different ways: on one side, there was a challenge to gain the high priesthood (both Enochites and Hasmoneans tried, but only the latter succeeded); on the other side the theological significance of the temple was moved from the physical sanctuary to the community of the elected (Essenes first and then Christians).

We will focalize our attention on these last two groups, in as much as the Essenes identified their own community and its liturgy with the heavenly temple (this is particularly evident in the case of the community of Qumran), while the Christians substituted Jerusalem's sanctuary in various ways, principally with Jesus Christ, high priest and sacrifice at the same time (as is very clear in the *Letter to the Hebrews*); in both cases with the intent of not only opposing the temple religion, but also to offer an alternative community. The highpoint of rethinking the temple's religious and political dimension was reached in the *Revelation of John*, where it is held that, in the heavenly Jerusalem, there will no longer be a need for a temple «because the Lord, God almighty, and the Lamb are his temple» (21:22).

1. Jerusalem's conquest of local sanctuaries

For pre-exile Israel, temples were a religious reality that was part of the daily setting; the local sanctuaries, the «high places» and other sites of more or less ancient worship, in fact, appear all over in the Land of Israel. The Bible speaks of them on many occasions, linking them to the great men of Israelite history: Abraham and the patriarchs built various altars, and so also Joshua, Samuel, and finally Solomon. Next to the Israelite worship sites appear often those of the Canaanites, the two being sometimes coincident. Their existence and thriving is demonstrated exactly by both the violent invectives of the prophets and the projects to unify the people's worship in one place.

The attempts to centralize worship in Jerusalem, made by Hezekiah (715-686 B.C. see 2Kgs 18:1-8) and Josiah (640-609 B.C. see 2Kgs 22f.), witness to the will to concentrate in one place the religious and political prerogatives of the local sanctuaries, thereby eliminating them: to control the sole temple was a way of keeping the people united around a single center and clergy, controlled directly by the king. Both mentioned kings failed. Hezekiah's reform was stopped when his son Manasseh (687-642 B.C. see 2Kgs 21:1-6) came to the throne. His «counter-Reformation» was not so much a concession to the local autonomies as, rather, it was related to the immediate political necessities, as was the case with Solomon, namely to develop a policy of alliances that required numerous matrimony, the wives bringing with them their own divinities as well and ending up favoring the religious syncretistic tendencies within the population which the prophets of Yhwh, instead, abhorred. It was a political success, because Manasseh reigned for a long time, while his successor Josiah, who returned to the politics of reforms with the aim of re-establishing the kingdom of David, was doomed to tragic failure.

Josiah, in fact, attempted again a policy of autonomy and centralization, renewing Hezekiah's reforms. The legend tells of how the idea came about because of the providential find in the temple of the book containing the last of the God of Israel (2 Kgs 22:3-23,25). The ideas that lead the king to reform are those expressed in *Deuteronomy*, of which the first draft was probably written in those years.

What interests us here is the centralization of worship, as we find it in Deut 12 and 14:23-26. Here the key phrase is: «in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name». There is no talk of a temple and the place where the choice of God is addressed is not indicated, a silence that must have had deep

significance. There being a general agreement on the fact that the collection of laws that are at the heart of *Deuteronomy* have a northern origin (chapters 12-26), it is not possible that originally there was a reference to Jerusalem. The vagueness comes about rather from the awareness that in the old days the people had various places, chosen by the Lord as points of reference for his worship (such as Shechem and Silo).¹ According to P. Miller, this vagueness is kept rather to remind the people that there exists an appropriate place where the Lord can be found and adored, but that place is not arbitrary and is not just any place. In the Lord's command it is He alone that chooses and reveals the place for his dwelling and meeting with human life and with the people of God.²

Josiah's reform, as radical and violent as it was, did not last long, neither in the royal court nor within the people, because as soon as the king was killed in battle, his son returned to the old syncretistic habits. Soon after, however, the Kingdom of Judah will be wiped away by the violent wave of the troops of Nebuchadnezzar, who in two successive campaigns will deport the ruling classes of Judah to Babylon, leaving Jerusalem in ruins and the population decimated. It will be in the land of exile that the future of the Israelite religion and its temple will be played out.

2. The reform of Ezra and Nehemiah: the Zadokite temple

In Babylon, in fact, the power struggle will be played between what remains of the royal court on the one hand and on the other by the priestly reformists that blame the king and the lay aristocracy for the destruction of Jerusalem. The defeat will be read through those theological terms, elaborated mainly at the time of Josiah by prophets like Jeremiah. In the work of Ezekiel we read how the priests start organizing the return as a seizure of power with the instauration of a priestly theocracy, gathered around a renewed temple (Ezek 40-48).

In the book of Ezekiel the terms «sanctuary» and «temple» receive a special emphasis: in particular the vision of the reconstruction of the temple of Jerusalem is programmed, for which the details are defined with great care, because it must serve as the center of the new Israel. The same importance is taken up by the priests, who, at least it is hoped, will become the guides of Israel that

¹ See G. von Rad: *Deuteronomy*, Grand Rapids 1966, 88-94.

² P.D. Miller: *Deuteronomio*, Torino 2008, 144.

have returned to the Lord. The descendants of Zadok are those destined to command because they had not waivered as the others in the syncretistic policies of the monarchy.

Ezekiel will die in exile, but his program will be carried on by other priests like him, who will gradually accomplish the return to Jerusalem and will impose their theological ideas and policies, finally conquering the reconstructed temple, having eliminated also the last Davidic representative, Zerubbabel. To definitely enforce this prominence, Israel once and for all will be reorganized around the laws of Moses by Nehemiah and Ezra, who will link the high priesthood to a precise group of families, lowing the others to minor priestly or to Levitical status (see particularly Neh 12).

3. The fall of the Zadokites

The Zadokite system of the priesthood upheld the temple of Jerusalem until the start of the second century B.C., when Sirach celebrated Simon as high priest in the following way (Sir 50):

1 The leader of his brothers and the pride of his people was the high priest, Simon son of Onias, who in his life repaired the house, and in his time fortified the temple. [...] 5 How glorious he was, surrounded by the people, as he came out of the house of the curtain. 6 Like the morning star among the clouds, like the full moon at the festal season; 7 like the sun shining on the temple of the Most High, like the rainbow gleaming in splendid clouds; 8 like roses in the days of first fruits, like lilies by a spring of water, like a green shoot on Lebanon on a summer day; 9 like fire and incense in the censer, like a vessel of hammered gold studded with all kinds of precious stones; 10 like an olive tree laden with fruit, and like a cypress towering in the clouds. 11 When he put on his glorious robe and clothed himself in perfect splendor, when he went up to the holy altar, he made the court of the sanctuary glorious.³

After almost three centuries of control on the temple and on the politico-religious life of Jerusalem, at the start of the second century B.C. the glorious Zadokite supremacy was, however, to end up in blood: the struggle for the conquest of the sanctuary would soon start right within its own group. In 174 B.C. the philhellenic brother of the high priest in charge, by his Greek name of Jason, goes to the Macedonian king Antiochus IV (since the year 198 B.C.

³ All quotations from the New Revised Standard Version.

the land of Israel makes up part of the Hellenistic kingdom of Syria) and buys the high priest post, thus destituting his brother. This is the start of the Hellenizing reform of Judaism, which will lead to the revolt of the traditionalists after a few years. First, however, the Zadokite priesthood loses control of the high pontificate definitely, when this is given by the king to another pretender, Menelaus, who did not belong to a legitimate Zadokite family. He even has the old Onias III (171) killed, causing his son to flee into Egypt, where he will found the temple of Leontopolis. A part of the Zadokite priesthood will tie their destiny to this new site.

Some of the Zadokites that remained in Jerusalem joined with another ancient movement, the Enochites, who foresaw now, in the political and religious chaos created by the intensified persecution of the Hellenists against the traditionalist, the possibility of gaining control of the temple. For many scholars, in fact, the death of Alcymus (159), a moderate Hellenist that had taken the place of the assassinated Menelaus, would have occupied the post of high priest that mysterious figure that the Qumran texts call the 'Teacher of righteousness'.⁴ Driven out by the new patrons of Israelite politics, the Hasmoneans, who had guided the struggle of the traditionalists against the Hellenists and their Greek supporters, the Teacher of righteousness eventually led his group to Qumran, to form the community that has left us the famous scrolls.

After these confused years, the conquest of the temple, having passed through various hands, is now in those of the Hasmoneans, who establish their new independent dynasty of kings and high priests, that will last until power is taken over by the Idumaea Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.). Not being of the priestly race, from then on the high priesthood will be nominated first by the new king and later by the Roman occupants, who will use this power often without scruples, contributing thus to the demise of the priesthood.

4. The transfer of the prerogatives of the temple to the community: the Qumran experience

The civil war experience in the second century B.C. and the rise to religious and political power of the new Jewish leaders, the Hasmoneans, caused the

⁴ The thesis is, naturally, highly controversial and is based both on the vague historical references that we find in the *Pesherim* of Qumran as well as on references by Josephus (Ant. XX 10,3 [237]) to the fact that from 159 to 153 Jerusalem remained without a high priest, which in effect is not very likely.

Zadokite priesthood to divide into several different groups and opened a new phase characterized by what we could call the *theological conquest* of the temple. If this, in fact, until its destruction will remain the point of reference even for the vast diaspora and a symbol of unity for the Judaism, extremely variegated in its theological positions, we can see how its religious power as mediator between God and his people becomes more and more advocated by various religious trends and by single individuals who will be readily persecuted by the authorities, as confirmation as well of the political value of their statements and gestures.

What breaks with tradition, giving room for something new, is established by the community living in Qumran. The problem with this group is not only tied to the fact that they lost (or perhaps never attained) control of the high priesthood. They, in fact, were fundamentally interested in having their way in making sacrifice according to their conception of purity and impurity. This comes out well in the texts on their programs such as *4QMMT* or the *Temple Scroll*.

The fundamental religious question they asked was: if the temple is run according to a calendar and rules that are inadequate, that means that the sacrifice is no longer valid. What can, therefore, restore the relationship between God and His people, if this is so gravely compromised by a sin that has not been expiated? Once it became clear that it was impossible to take control of the temple, in Essene environments a new idea gradually emerged: it is the elected community that lives in an absolute regime of purity that substitutes the role held by the temple of Jerusalem. If the reform program is evident in the utopic project expressed in the *Temple Scroll*, where it is suggested an ideal image of the temple and of the holy city, in texts like the *Songs of the Sabbath Holocaust* it is seen how the community and its liturgy have now taken the place of the temple, which is in fact no longer necessary. The horizon of salvation, however, in their theology is restricted to a small group of the elect, the true Israel.

With Qumran, a new path is open in the theological thought of the Middle Jewish period, and we can clearly see it in one text of the Enochic tradition, dating probably around the first half of the first century. It is the *Second Book of Enoch*, or the *Slavonic Enoch*, a work evidently tied to the Essenes (but not to the sectarian group of Qumran), in which not only the importance of sacrifice is held (which must be done bonding the legs of the victims), but it is also stated that the sacrifice must be held in a place other than Jerusalem (called Azuchan, the collocation of which is not identifiable) and that the legitimate priesthood

is the one making reference to Melchisedek, the perfect and eternal priest, risen to paradise and awaiting for the end of times. Once more, the attack to Jerusalem's temple and to its priesthood, considered illegitimate, is clear. The echoes that we find in the *Letter to the Hebrews* that makes Jesus a priest according to the order of Melchisedek, on which we will return, are evident.

5. Another expropriation of the temple's prerogatives? John the Baptist

At the edges of the non Qumranic Essenism, in the twenties of the first century a very particular protagonist starts his preaching: it is John the Baptist, known for introducing in Judaism the practice of baptism. Presenting himself as an Elijah returned to life, he calls the people to baptism as a sign of their repentance. But what significance does this act have, so new in that it was administered only once, even if the use of water in cleansing was widespread in Middle Judaism?

It isn't easy to give one clear answer, because the sources offer us substantially two conflicting options. While Josephus stresses that he put in some way the seal on the practice of virtue (that had in reality power to redeem), for the Gospels of Mark and Luke it was the baptism itself that had the power to forgive sins.

Matthew 3,1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 «Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.» ... 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ... 11 «I baptize you with water for repentence...»	Mark 1,4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.	Luke 3,2 ... the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ... 7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, «You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, «We have Abraham as our ancestor»	John 3,22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized 24 – John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. 25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew.	Josephus, <i>Jewish antiquities</i> 18,117 For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behavior ⁵
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Examining the various passages that refer to the baptism of John, we can clearly note three particular tendencies. First, Mark and Luke, that for some scholars make up the oldest and most trustworthy historical tradition, underline the salvific aspect of this baptism, clarifying that it is for the forgiveness of sins. Second, Matthew implicitly, and in a more explicit way Josephus, stress that producing fruit worthy of repentance is the determining element; and baptism then, would constitute a kind of seal placed on a process of conversion demonstrated by acts. This way of looking at it is similar to that which we find in the *Rule of the Community*, a fundamental writing for understanding the theology and the religious practices of Qumran, where the purification of ritual baths is valid only if it leads to a life in tune with the rules of the sect. Third, there's John the evangelist who, concerning baptism, in the passage cited makes reference to a discussion, unfortunately not explicit, on purification. Are we to deduce then that for the fourth evangelist baptism was above all tied to purification of the body? Now, which of these interpretations is the one that is closest to historical reality of the facts? To answer this question we must examine a few elements.

To start with, the version of Josephus seems very apologetic, almost as if he wanted to save John from the accusation of having invented a shortcut to salvation with respect to sacrifice in the Temple. It's possible that the Jewish historian writes against the interpretation witnessed in Mark's Gospel that, for many scholars, was written in Rome? It can be surmised that Josephus might have been aware of the Christian version of John's baptism and wanted to contrast it here, taking away its legitimacy in reference to the Baptist. But is it Josephus who completes a process of «normalization» of John's actions or is it the Christians who give a different meaning to his baptism?

A help might come from the passage cited from the Fourth Gospel, where there is a confrontation between the baptism of Jesus and that of John. It's possible that this discussion brings out a trace of an ancient division between Jesus and John (or between their respective disciples) on the meaning of baptism. While John, in fact, could well have intended the meaning of his baptism along the lines indicated by Josephus, that is, as a seal on the process of conversion, Jesus clearly prefers to stress that the only way to salvation for a person

⁵ Translated by L.H. Feldman, Harvard (MA) / London 1965, 81-83.

is to trust completely in God. Here then, for Jesus, baptism becomes a sign of forgiveness of sins that comes from God's grace. The fruits come later, as a consequence.

If this supposition is correct, then it is possible that John's baptism was a sign of purification from sins already healed by the conversion and proved by the facts. The line of Mark and Luke would reflect Jesus' interpretation of John's baptism. Matthew and Josephus would witness, instead, a tradition closer to the real meaning of the Johannine baptism.

There remains the last aspect to clarify, that which interests more in this study. For some scholars, in fact, baptism is offered as a way of criticizing the Temple of Jerusalem. If it represents the purification from impurity that derives from sin, the only logical consequence is that John (who, according to Luke, was of the priestly class) no longer considers the sacrifices made by the priests in the Temple as valid. Some perplexity remains. In the first place, in fact, why would Josephus have found sympathy from a man who considered sacrifices offered in the Temple as nothing? Josephus belonged to the high priesthood and in his writings does not give any sign of sharing a similar position; just the opposite!

In the second place, the ritual ablutions were a practice that was already rather widespread in Jewish circles of that time, without this fact constituting a refusal of sacrifice or its substitute. Even with the Essenes, who brought purity immersions to a maximum level, the problems with the temple were tied to the observance of some of the purity norms and of a different calendar; it was this that nullified the validity of sacrifices practiced there, and the immersions probably constituted their temporary substitute.

In the third place, the eschatological scene lets us better understand the meaning of the gesture considered exceptional, if the Temple, in other words, could be sufficient for daily life, to prepare oneself for the advent of the Kingdom an exceptional measure that went further than that was necessary. If, at any rate, baptism did not want to substitute sacrifice, it wanted to complete it with a sensational gesture, worthy of the appeals of the ancient prophets. Thus the fact remains that it took its place in view of salvific authority before the coming judgment, the power of the priests is insufficient. Who wants to be saved must pass through another mediator, who affirms to have received from god an exceptional power: John (helped by his disciples).

6. Christian taking over of the prerogatives of the Temple

6.1 Jesus and the gospel tradition

The mission of Jesus, according to John the evangelist, opens with the purification of the temple: a very strong political action, that indicates the refusal of a corrupt ruling class, aimed to establish direct control by God through his eschatological delegate. The accusation of wanting to destroy the temple will later become the formal cause for which the Nazarene is condemned to death: the Romans and the Jewish authorities read his gesture, and all his actions in general, as a subversive attempt against the *pax romana*. And in effect the action in the temple had this precise aim, as we clearly see from the events occurring during the passion, that the Synoptics start the passion narrative with the driving of the merchants from the temple: the coming of the Kingdom brings with it a new reality that subverts the old and corrupt one. It is a challenge between Jesus and the priests to demonstrate who has the real authority on the temple, that is on the administration of the relationship between God and his people: the challenge is launched with the purification of the temple and with the invective that follows; the response of the priests will be the arrest and condemnation to crucifixion. This challenge is verbally expressed in the episode of the insults at the cross (Mark 15):

29 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, «Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!» 31 In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, «He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.»

The priesthood challenges him to demonstrate who really has authority. The resurrection and the tearing of the temple curtain will be the answer, becoming the definite sign of the taking over of the prerogatives of the temple (Matt 27 and parallels):

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. [...] 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, «Truly this man was God's Son!».

The priestly privilege is abolished, its religious power and therefore also its political power, pass to other hands: the centurion gives public witness attributing to Jesus the title that was also claimed by the Roman emperors: Son of God. From now on it will be up to each single believer to decide on his relationship with God, because Christ has become the new mediator.

It is interesting to note how this taking over of the temple is described with various hints from the other evangelists. In Luke it is represented in a pictorial way: the evangelist opens and closes his Gospel in the temple. First there's the vision of Zachariah, to whom is announced the birth of John the Baptist, then there's the episode of Jesus at twelve years of age (Luke 1-2). One of the temptations takes place on the parapet of the temple and, after the ascension, the disciples regularly «occupy» the temple, this time in a peaceful manner: «returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God», Luke 24,52-53).

In the *Book of Acts* at the end of chapter 5, the temple is the scene of the first Christian preaching and of the conflict with the Jewish authorities. Then the context of the mission changes: after the great refusal, represented by the stoning of Stephen, the temple returns only at the end as the setting of Paul's arrest (Acts 21). In verse 21, 30, the gates of the temple symbolically close to Christian preaching: the separation is sealed.

In the Gospel of John, lastly, the temple is the place to which Jesus frequently goes and where the most important debates with the Jews occur: has it become the image of the synagogue, the «battlefield» between Christians and their fellow Jews at the end of the first century? Probably yes, but nevertheless the fourth evangelist draws abundantly from the priestly language to describe Jesus's work.

6.2. *The Epistles*

It's interesting to see in Paul's letters that there is no direct reference to the temple in Jerusalem (1 Cor 9:13 being only an indirect reference),⁶ even though it plays a part in his life, as we are told in the *Book of Acts*. This, even if the temple and its world are a part of Pauline spirituality in an implicit way, as we can see from his wide use of sacrificial language. The fact of

⁶ Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar?

being a Jew in itself makes him use categories that are typical of sacrificial religion.⁷

Some statements, in particular, seem to me to be a sign of a progressive appropriation of the temple, following the example of the Essenes and the preaching of Jesus. For example, in 1 Cor 3:16 Paul states that we are the temple of God, while in 6:19 our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (a parallel passage is 2 Cor 6:16f.). If the *we* refers to the community, understood as the body of Christ, we are clearly on the wavelength of the understanding of the community of Qumran, where the community of the elect took the place of the sanctuary.

In the passage of Rom 3:21-25 Jesus becomes the expiating sacrifice:

21 But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

If M.L. Rigato is right in holding that with *hilasterion* Paul makes here reference to a copy of the Covenant Ark that could be found in the Temple, making of Christ its representation, and therefore a representation of the object conserved therein, almost a figuration of God himself,⁸ it seems to me that we can therefore say that this passage is part of the reasoning that we have put into evidence: so far early Christianity was taking over the temple, transferring to Jesus resurrected its salvific prerogative and a representation of the divinity. This process, as Rigato rightly states, is made complete in the *Gospel of John*, where in 2,21 the body itself of Jesus becomes *naos*, temple, manifestation of the Father. Along the same lines are other New Testament texts, like: Rom 12:1-2; Eph 5:1; 1 John 2:1; 4:10.

⁷ M.L. Rigato lists all the passages in which such language connected with the temple appears very precisely: M.L. Rigato: Giovanni, l'enigma, il Presbitero, il culto, il Tempio, la cristologia, Bologna 2007, see especially 148-152.

⁸ M.L. Rigato: Paolo e il tempio di Gerusalemme, in: In caritate veritas. Luigi Padovese. Vescovo cappuccino, vicario apostolico dell'Anatolia. Scritti in memoria, a cura di P. Martinelli e L. Bianchi, Bologna 2011, 448.

In *Ephesians*, a pseudo-Pauline letter, it is rather the church that becomes the temple of God, in the spirit of *1Corinthians* (Eph 2):

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

2 Thess 2:4 brings us to another sphere, more apocalyptic: «He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God», where «He» is the Antichrist, appearing in the temple of Jerusalem, as a pretext to the acquisition of power.

6.3 *Revelation*

In *Revelation* we find continual reference to the temple and its altar, presenting a curious ambiguity: now it is the privileged place of the manifestation of the power of God, but at the end of times the new Jerusalem will have no temple, but God himself and the Lamb. The sanctuary can be used both as a metaphor for believers (Rev 3:12), or as a representation of the place in which God dwells (Rev 7:15, the angels serve him in his temple), that becomes the place of the emanation of God (Rev 14-16). The presence of God and of the Lamb in the heavenly Jerusalem, that will be revealed at the end of times, indicates the end of every earthly power, represented by the great whore, that is, Rome. The victory of God in Christ will reveal itself as the power takeover at a cosmic level.

6.4 *Letter to Hebrews*

The *Letter to Hebrews*, in the New Testament, works the most on the image of the temple, using fundamental concepts: those of the «sanctuary» (take note that here the word «sanctuary» is used, and never «temple»), «altar», «sacrifice», «high priesthood»... The discourse of the author of this epistle should be followed passage after passage in its argumentation, but here it will be enough to stress that the value of the death of Jesus and of his resurrection is explained using in a very peculiar way the language of the sanctuary. His sacrificial death substitutes the sacrificial worship and empties the meaning of the Aaronic

priesthood. Although not belonging to the priestly class, that of Jesus is declared to be a priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek, the mysterious man of Gen 14:18-20 and Ps 110:4, whom we have already met talking about *2Enoch*, which is the perfect order, rather than the Levitical one, which was tied to the law and therefore was transitory and imperfect.

7. *Conclusions*

What we have seen up to this point leads us to conclude that early Christianity evidently develops a process, already in act in the Middle Jewish Period, of «conquest» of the temple by religious groups outside the priesthood of Jerusalem. For the historical and theological reasons indicated, within the Essene movement two types of the acquisition of the religious prerogatives of the temple develop. The first is that of the Qumran community, in which the substitute is the community itself in which the liturgy is held, putting the adept in direct communication with the angels. In particular we find Paul and the Pauline tradition tied to this discourse. The second trail is that of the substitution of the Aaronic priesthood with that of Melchizedek, which we have seen in *2Enoch*, and in which the author of the *Letter to Hebrews* sees its realization in Jesus Christ.

Christianity is placed, from this point of view, in continuity mainly with the theological reflection of the Essenes, in its various shadings, adapting it to the faith in the risen Christ. The earthly temple, as a place of religious and political power, is emptied and humbled: its spiritual tasks are transferred to Christ. From here the conviction of having, as Paul says in Phil 3,20 «your citizenship in heaven» and not on earth. From here also the perception of Christianity as a body estranged from the social and religious connection with the Jews *in primis* and secondly with that of the Romans; a self-perception that gave origin to the persecutions by the Jews first and then by the Romans.

Abstract

In this article I examine the process through which the Jewish religious groups, excluded from the circle of the priesthood of Jerusalem, operated a theological «conquest» of the temple. The focus is on the Essene movement, within which two acquisitions of the religious prerogatives of the temple developed: the Qumran community substitutes the Jerusalem liturgy, putting the adept in direct communication with the angels (Paul and Pauline tradition are tied to this discourse), and the Enochic tradition substitutes Aaronic priesthood with that of Melchizedek (2Enoch and similarly the Letter to Hebrews). In this respect Christianity develops the theological reflection of the Essenes, adapting it to the faith in the risen Christ. The earthly temple, as a place of religious and political power, is emptied and humbled: its spiritual tasks are transferred to Christ.

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